

— SUSTAINABLE LIVING AND PLANET CARE —

# EARTH GARDEN

— FOR BUSH OR CITY ALTERNATIVES —

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Earth Garden's Strawbale, Solar-Powered,  
Solar-Heated Office — see page 10

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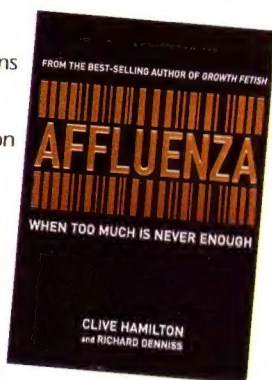


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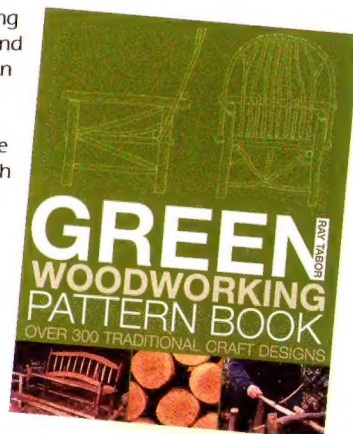
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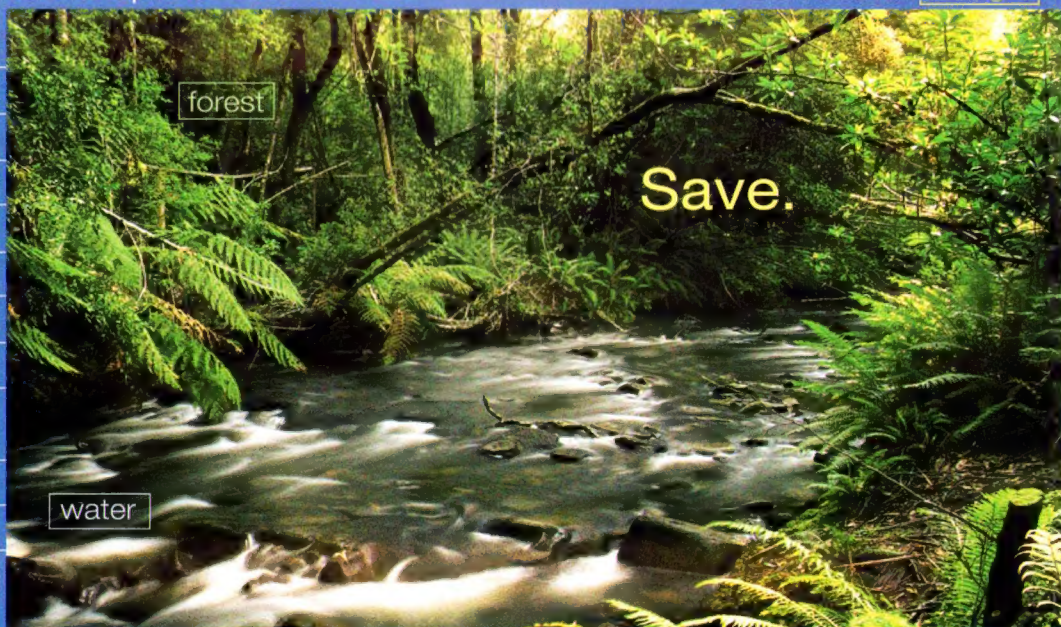
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**Front Cover:** Who wants a Green office? We do! *Earth Garden* staff shivering with excitement (or is it the chilly central Victorian winter?) as they inspect progress on their solar-powered, solar-heated, strawbale office being built at Trentham in Victoria. From left are: Doug Falconer, Judith Gray, Shelley Sandow, Kerry Crosbie, Karen Sandow, Linda Wheeler, Tony Fuery and Alan T Gray. Read part one of the story about the new EG new office starting on page ten.

— SUSTAINABLE LIVING AND PLANET CARE —  
**EARTH GARDEN**  
 — FOR BUSH OR CITY ALTERNATIVES —

**Number 133**  
**September – November 2005**

**EcoTax:** this issue's EcoTax will go to the 'Gunns 20' to help their legal defence against Gunns Ltd, Tasmania's giant export woodchipping company, which is suing the environmentalists for more than \$6 million. Read more in *Bush Telegraph* this issue.

**Back Cover:** Jo, a Dutch wwoofers after a hard day raking and stooking hay on Jill Redwood's farm in Victoria's East Gippsland. Read more about the delights and challenges of hosting wwoofers in Jill's entertaining article starting on page 30. Photograph by Mirjam.



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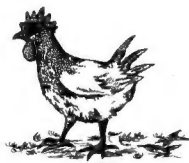
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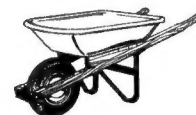


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Founded by Keith & Irene Smith, 1972.

**EARTH GARDEN** is Australia's original journal of sustainable living and alternatives. It is a forum of practical ideas, shared knowledge, sources and a guide to alternatives to high-consumption lifestyles. It's about putting a roof over your head, growing your own food organically, aiming for appropriate, renewable home energy systems and surviving — and thriving — in the city or the bush, with the inner changes which follow when you're in harmony with Nature.

**EcoTax:** each issue we donate a portion of the cover price to a community group involved in conservation or social justice projects to help balance the use of the partly recycled paper used for printing *Earth Garden*. We would like to see all publishers pay an EcoTax.

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Contributions to *Earth Garden* are welcome: sharing information and experiences with other readers strengthens the network of Earth Gardeners. Photos and illustrations are important. Please write first with your story idea. Subscribers are sustainers: for subscription details see page 80.

We welcome advertisements appropriate to the aims and ideals of *Earth Garden*, but reserve the right to refuse ads at our discretion. Contact us for display rates.

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(We don't have the resources to staff telephone enquiries: please write or fax.)



# Beyond The Bitumen

Dear readers,

Welcome to the spring issue of *Earth Garden*. The big news with *Earth Garden* this issue is our brand new, nearly-completed (as we write) strawbale, solar-powered, solar-heated office in the chilly highlands of central Victoria near Daylesford. For 13 years we've worked in a pretty but tumbledown old converted house, which has served us very well. But now we're moving into a state of the art office that should serve us well for the next 20 or 30 years.

It's been fun designing the office, but a little stressful co-ordinating all the tradies to work on the site. Our rock-of-Gibraltar Office Manager, Karen Sandow — ably supported by our Advertising Manager, Doug Falconer — has done a sterling job chasing up all the tradespeople and trying to co-ordinate them all while we've been away camping. Anyone not doing all their own owner-building, but trying to work around the haphazard schedules of tradespeople these days, will know what we mean! You can read all about our progress so far starting on page ten.

This is the time of year I look forward to the most: the signs of spring are emerging as the daffodils fade and the wattle is in full bloom. Harry has just dug up a lovely patch of spuds he didn't get time to harvest before we went outback in autumn and we had a feast of baked spuds and winter greens on our first night home from three weeks away camping in the outback.

Our family's quite addicted to throwing the swags on the roof and heading for the remotest patches of out-

back desert we can find. Each winter we try to take the children away, and we all love nothing better than sleeping under the stars in our swags ("cowboy camping," the boys call it) and cooking on the campfire under the stars. The children all pitch in with gathering firewood, cooking, repacking and setting up camp, and it's a wonderful time for us all to be together sharing the same experiences. Too often it seems that family life is a fractured set of isolated experiences, which sometimes converge at meal times — sometimes not even then. We treasure our family times together in the outback each winter and this year travelled through the Simpson, the Gibson, the Great Sandy, Little Sandy and Tanami deserts. This is also the time of year when our vegie patch is doing absolutely nothing.

Now we're back home with the office to finish off (we'll bring you more details in our summer issue) and the spring vegie garden to embrace with gusto, we're starting to think about planting all those trees, vegies, flowers and shrubs we imagined while in the outback. Everyone seems to have their favourite vegies in our family: Harry loves growing spuds (and most other vegies for that matter), Bertie is the carrot and onion master in the family, and Woody loves growing and picking sweet corn. Tomatoes and sweet corn seem to be my domain and Judith likes growing herbs and most vegies. Adelaide likes to help with whatever's happening in the vegie patch, as long as there's plenty of action and something to munch on.

We're all quietly reviewing lists of vegie seeds to plant from the list on page 14 of the latest Good Life catalogue, and this must surely be one of the most exciting aspects of this time of year in southern Australia: choosing vegie seeds to plant, knowing that in a few short weeks you'll start to get that special buzz from watching tiny green shoots struggle through the soil.

I know this sounds condescending, but I truly feel sorry for people madly rushing about their business not realising that this is the time of year to get into their back gardens, plant some seeds and stand back and watch the amazing and exciting results.

So whether it's the idea of a solar-powered, solar-heated strawbale building, a few precious tomato plants in pots on your balcony, or a full blown neighbourhood-sized food garden that excites you, I hope you enjoy some of the inspiring tales in this issue of *Earth Garden*.

Happy reading,



**Harry Gray digs up a feast of Red Bison spuds the day we arrived home from camping in the outback.**



**Earth People Write** is an open forum. The views expressed in letters from readers do not necessarily reflect the opinions of *Earth Garden*. Letters are always welcome, but please keep them concise. This issue we're giving away to our favorite letter writer a copy of the brand-new edition of *The Earth Garden Building Book*.

### **VW electrics help?**

*Dear 'Earth Garden',*

My 1976 VW Passat has a power problem with the regulator that controls voltage to gauges in the instrument panel. The regulator is a German brand VDO 12 volt. It is required to supply between 6 to 8 volts from a 12-volt system but appears to be over this as gauges give a high false reading. Gauges still operate as a thermal type.

The regulator plugs into the rear of the instrument cluster with three spade type terminals. This holds the fuel and water temp gauges, clock and all bulbs for lighting gauges. All units are connected by a printed circuit backing board where the gauges are mounted. The tank sender unit tests out okay. I need to know if someone can design a replacement or if anyone knows of new replacement parts for these with wiring diagrams?

**Vic Heazli, 126 Mapleton Rd, Nambour, Qld, 4560.**

### **Paper brick making idea**

*Dear 'Earth Garden',*

Maureen Glazebrook wrote in EG 130 about paper briquettes. I recall a simple method of making paper bricks from many years back, using a broom handle. Hoping my memory serves me correctly, the method involved the following steps. 1. Tear newspaper sheets 20 to 25 cm wide (8 to ten inches). 2. Grease or oil the end 30 cm (12 inches) of a broom handle. 3. Dip the newspaper into a bin of water. 4. Wrap the newspaper pieces around the greased broom handle. 5. When the desired size is achieved, sustain with two or three elastic bands. 6. Slide the briquette off the broom handle, and allow it to dry. Note: wet newspaper shrinks on drying.

The oil or grease on the broom handle is, of course, to facilitate easy removal of briquette. The hole in the centre of the brick allows flames to enter and increases

combustion. It should work – sounds okay to me! A tapered shaft may even work better. May I suggest advertisers use postal addresses as well as web sites? Some of us oldies can feel left out.

**Kel Connell, Karuah, NSW.**

### **'No War' update**

*Dear 'Earth Garden',*

In EG 128 you ran a piece on the "No War" slogan clean-up fund. Any chance of an update?

**Mark Gillies, Palm Beach, Qld.**

*Dear Mark,*

*We will contact the people involved and bring you an update soon.*

— Alan.

### **Commercial horse droppings safe?**

*Dear 'Earth Garden',*

As a new subscriber I love your mag and look forward to each arrival. I'm wondering if I could ask your advice through the *Earth People Write* section. I am attempting to set up an organic vegie garden and I have access to large quantities of well rotted stable manure mixed with wood shavings and saw dust. My concern is that as this comes from a commercial racehorse stable would it be wise to grow our vegies in this? I'm particularly concerned as I believe racehorses have many performance-enhancing substances added to their feed. Could this contaminate our vegies? Many thanks.

**Evette, evettecampbell@yahoo.com.**

### **Organic gardening courses?**

*Dear 'Earth Garden',*

We love *Earth Garden* magazine and wish it was a monthly publication! Thank you for your dedication to providing us with such a quality periodical. I wrote last year

wondering about external organic gardening courses and had a reply from a gentleman in Bairnsdale (I think) who gave me information on one. Unfortunately, in a fit of cleaning I deleted his email and can remember neither his name nor the educational facility he was attached to. I'm hoping that somebody will know who I'm talking about and be able to email me this information, which I will then store in my address book for safer keeping! Many thanks.

**Sandy Gunder, isgunder@iprimus.com.au.**

### **Starting out in strawbale**

*Hi,*

We are looking at building a new house within the next five years. More than likely it would be in the Ballarat, Greendale and Mt Egerton triangle. We would be looking at a couple of acres and a strawbale house would seem to be the most appropriate method of construction. We have looked at rammed earth but that worked out to be about three times the cost of a brick house.

I have always wanted to build a strawbale house. Your site is by far the most informative that we have found. Where would we find information on floor plans or can any floor plan be modified to allow construction with strawbales? We are only in the preliminary "homework" stage and are looking for information that relates to the total cost of a strawbale house.

In short where can we find info to work out the cost, something like Simmons or Executive Homes? This house is so big and it will cost so much. Regards.

**Greg and Jacinta Lambert, caramar@netconnect.com.au.**

### **Treated pine and home schooling**

*Dear 'Earth Garden',*

I have been reading your fantastic

magazine since I moved to Australia and I love it, keep up the great work!

I have two questions. One according to my garden and one to your readers and their friends and I would love it if you could help me with some answers since I don't know where to ask any more (and I think you are a great source).

#### **Treated pine in my vegetable garden**

I have a beautiful vegetable garden set-up which my father-in-law had built for me as a present and I used to love it and plant stuff there all the time. But recently I found out how bad treated pine really is and my garden beds are made of it, so since then I have neglected it thinking it is probably better to buy my vegies organic than to grow them there. I would really like to do the right thing in this area since I have two children and I love to work in the garden and show them how things work but I do not want to take any risks.

It will not make sense to rip the garden apart since we are only planning on living here another one or two years. How bad is this situation and is there anything I can do or shall I just keep on buying my vegies and start to grow flowers in my garden?

#### **Homeschooling together?**

I am a mum and a mum-to-be in Spring and I am not planning on sending my children to any public school system. I disagree with the way grown ups think they know what is best for their children. I think that every child knows best and has to learn what they want and who they are throughout their lives and they cannot do that if they constantly have someone sitting on top of them telling them what to do and who to be. Then after our school years we are suddenly asked who we are and what we want to make of our lives and everybody is surprised that so many of us just do not know – but isn't that really the first time we are asked at all?

When a child follows its own rhythm right from the start and has a good environment to grow up in then it can do these things right from the start and learns everything on the way.

Anyway I would love to find a school that seems to be good for my children, but if I don't I am considering homeschooling and I would love to find other mums or dads in my area who would like to join me and my children to form a little group and prepare the environment for the children together so they feel free to grow and learn because they want to and not because they have to.

My son is currently two years old and I would love to find friends for him. We live on a beautiful property in the middle of the rainforest in Dapto near Wollongong.

I would prefer to find a school where

I could help (I am a teacher and I am very keen on Rebecca and Mauricio Wild's way to be with children). So if anyone would like to meet us or knows of a school that might be right for us we would be more than happy to hear from you.

Thank you very much. Your magazine is a great addition to my life. I love it.

**Maria Valentina Temple, PO Box 196 Dapto, 2530, NSW, mvtemple@ozemail.com.au, phone (02)4262 0777.**

#### **Tsunami auction**

Dear 'Earth Garden',

Woo hoo!!! My large box of back issues arrived today and my partner thought I was doing a war dance with all the dancing and whooping going on...

I am moving house this week and in my new house there is a little room that I have dubbed "Mum's reading room" and boy oh boy do I now have some reading material!

Thank you so much for the opportunity to purchase these beauties at such a reduced price and to help out the Tsunami victims at the same time. Cheers and happiness to all.

**Linda Hardingham, Email: lindaembs@bigpond.com.**

Dear Linda,

*Glad you liked the back copies – all readers can bid for a full set of the back copies of 'Earth Garden' by visiting the EG website at: [www.earthgarden.com.au](http://www.earthgarden.com.au) and following the links to the tsunami fundraiser. At the end of the year we'll tally up the donations made to Oxfam Australia's tsunami appeal and let you know how much the winning bidders contributed.*

— Alan.

#### **Threshing grain**

Dear 'Earth Garden',

I like to grow organic grains with spelt being the favourite. I also grow oats, rye, a variety of barley grains and others as I can get them. However, my problem is in the threshing. Does anyone know of a way, other than a flail, for small growers like me to separate the hull from the grain?

Spelt has a particularly tight hull with a few layers and is a real bugger to get off without a machine. So please if anyone can help please email me. Thanks in anticipation.

**Lindsay Houston, belfastscotsirish@hotmail.com.**

#### **Sydney opportunity, Bega baby!**

Dear Earth Gardeners,

There are two parts to our letter. Firstly, we will be moving from our rented house in Sydney and are looking for someone to continue the sustainable lifestyle we have created. Secondly, we are making the move to Bega to have our first child, due in December, and would love to hear from anyone in that

area who is also expecting or just keen to make new friendships. Dan is looking for part or full-time work on an organic farm in the region too if anyone is looking for an honest, committed worker.

We've made every effort to make our home sustainable and would like to pass it to someone who will appreciate and enjoy it. It's a four bedroom house, quiet street, floorboards, large open living spaces, large yard, native garden, approximately 30 square metres, productive vegie and herb beds in crop, well developed compost system (we have a deal with the local grocer to take three 60-litre bins of green waste a week), great local shops, bus and primary school around the corner, rail ten minutes walk, easy access to Parramatta and city. Current rent is \$290 a week which is fantastic for Sydney. We are looking for someone to take over the rent when we move around the end of October this year (negotiable). If you live in Sydney and would like a change or are looking to move to Sydney and don't want to pay rip-off rates, our place might be for you.

Those in the Bega region, we will have our birth through Bega hospital and any thoughts or experiences about the midwife program, support networks and the like are most welcome. Our interests are in organic market gardening and happy minimal impact lifestyles. Both of us currently work in the environmental/sustainability education field, but Dan is looking for work on an organic farm in the region to build skills to develop a farm of our own. Love to hear from you for any reason, especially if you are part of any sustainable living networks in the region that we could link into. Happy living.

**Dan and Vickie, ecolifestyle@yahoo.com.au, (02) 9638 4336, 1 Simpson St. Dundas Valley, 2117, NSW.**

#### **Citrus tree help**

Hello!

I live in Sydney (Hornsby) and have a small grove of citrus trees, among which is a very old and large lime tree. The lime tree has recently become diseased and I really need some professional help of a preferably organic kind.

Do you know of a keen organic horticulturalist/tree surgeon type person that I could employ to help me out? There are no organic gardeners/tree surgeons in the phone book, so I don't know where else to try! Thanks!

**Meredith Quinlan email: meredith.quinlan@pp-a.com.au, phone (02) 9282 9988, fax: (02) 9282 9222.**

## Strawbale building contact

Dear 'Earth Garden' crew,

I have just purchased your *Strawbale Homebuilding* for a friend who is going to build his new house using this method. Ideally he would like to assist any builders that are currently venturing into strawbale. If you know of anyone in the Barossa Valley-Gawler area, South Australia, it would be a great help.

We are aware of the courses run in Gawler, but Brian is very much seeking hands-on experience. Brian has beautifully restored an old ironstone and clay house, but now needs a new venture.

Thank you for a fantastic magazine and the books that come via.

**Helen Lewkowicz, Vic.**

Dear Helen,

Perhaps you could contact Bohdan Dorniak, architect, at 47 Prospect Rd, Prospect, SA, 5082. Phone (08) 8344 8170, email [bdco@merlin.et.Au](mailto:bdco@merlin.et.Au).

—Alan.

## Tagasaste seedlings and a small incubator

Dear staff,

Can you provide me with any leads in tracking down a provider of Tagasaste seedlings and a smallish incubator for chicken eggs? Any help would be appreciated.

**Alan Lyness, email: [alan.lynessr@dcs.nsw.gov.au](mailto:alan.lynessr@dcs.nsw.gov.au), phone (02) 6552 7599, fax: (02) 6551 2648.**

## Facial scrub recipe

Dear EG,

Whilst making some washing up liquid/clothes detergent, I stumbled upon a recipe for 'facial scrub'.

I was decanting the sloppy liquid I obtained from: grated soap pieces (I collected scraps), 1 cup washing soda, 1 large saucepan of water. Heat on stove till frothy. Add eucalyptus or lavender oil, about ten drops each, then mix with 3/4 bucket water – when I realised the sandy stuff in the bottom of my bucket wasn't sand at all, but the bits of 'Solvol' soap I had grated. I scrunched them up in a ball, mixed some calendula cream and some cocoa butter with it and scrubbed up. It worked a treat – especially if you cleanse with really cold water afterwards. I feel like a new person, and there's enough of it to fill a small tin. It should last for a while. PS Your magazine keeps me sane in a world gone mad. Integrity is still alive!

**M. Kennedy, Forrest, Vic.**

## Good year for the dahlias

Hello again to all Earth Gardeners,

It is time once again to forward my

subscription for another year of reading interesting and informative articles in *Earth Garden* – thanks again for all the hard work put in by the team at Trentham. Where would we be without you – up the garden path without a shovel!? It has been a hard summer season here with many hours of an evening spent holding the hose – but still we have managed to keep ourselves self-sufficient in vegies. It has been a good year for dahlia growing too, with a bright show in our front yard. I'm sure that growing plants helps to keep one sane in the mad world of ours. Keep up the good work and we look forward to our next issues arriving in the mail.

**Beth Cox, Wendouree, Vic.**

## Inspiring tips

Dear EG,

Having reached 40 and not owning anything, I took some words of advice from an old friend. "All you need is a bit of dirt and you'll always survive." So, I bought 100 acres, 50 kilometres east of Cooma from him.

He's an Englishman who grew up on the land in Somerset, England. He lives in a 4x4 humpy on 300 acres. "What more do you need?" he says, "I can keep dry and warm, you can only live in one room at a time."

He fertilises his garden from his toilet bucket and can't understand why people waste water and flush all those nutrients down the toilet. When it comes to basics you don't need much. I grew up in the city but have found my bit of paradise. Give me the open spaces, sounds of the birds and peacefulness any day.

Your articles are inspirational and full of useful tips. Great magazine.

**Anny Dejong, 'The Converted', Cooma, NSW.**

## Defeating mosquitos

Dear 'Earth Garden',

First things first. I have not yet read issue 132, just thumbed through it. A reader asks how to defeat mosquitoes. It is easy – eat garlic and they will not come near you! For good measure, if troubled by flies put lemon juice on your skin. Same result, they will not come near you!

**John Guest, Rockhampton, Qld.**

## Black pipe water heating

Dear readers,

I was wanting to reduce my hot water bills by running black pipe between the mains water and the hot water heater. The theory being, that ambient air temperature will raise the water temperature slightly in winter and significantly in summer. If there are any previous articles or info sites, please let me know.

**Rastus Watermelon Jnr, Danny Butler, Belgrave, Vic. Email: [ButlerD@heraldsun.com.au](mailto:ButlerD@heraldsun.com.au).**

## RAPS system donations for developing country

Hi 'Earth Garden',

Luv the mag and been reading it for years. Have my own piece of paradise and always look forward to inspiration from your mag.

Just wondering if you guys may be able to help with a project that may happen down the track. Initial enquiry at this point. I've been approached by friends in a developing country (some say third world) nearby to help install a RAPS (Remote Area Power Supply) system for the local hall/hospital/school etc. and teach the locals how to go about it. As in all of these types of areas resources are limited more or less down to diesel generators etc.

I have people ready to help on site but would be looking if anyone is interested to supply or donate any equipment or other assistance for this cause.

It's early days at the moment but I am looking to document and photograph the whole project which may be interesting (or not) for your magazine. Look forward to hearing from you. Best regards.

**Mark Traynor Email: [mark.traynor@se-anz.com](mailto:mark.traynor@se-anz.com).**

Dear Mark,

There is a section on RAPS in the book 'Energy from Nature', compiled by Peter Pedals, available from The Good Life Book Club (see advertisement this issue) for \$30 plus p&h.

—Alan.

## EG reader of thirty years

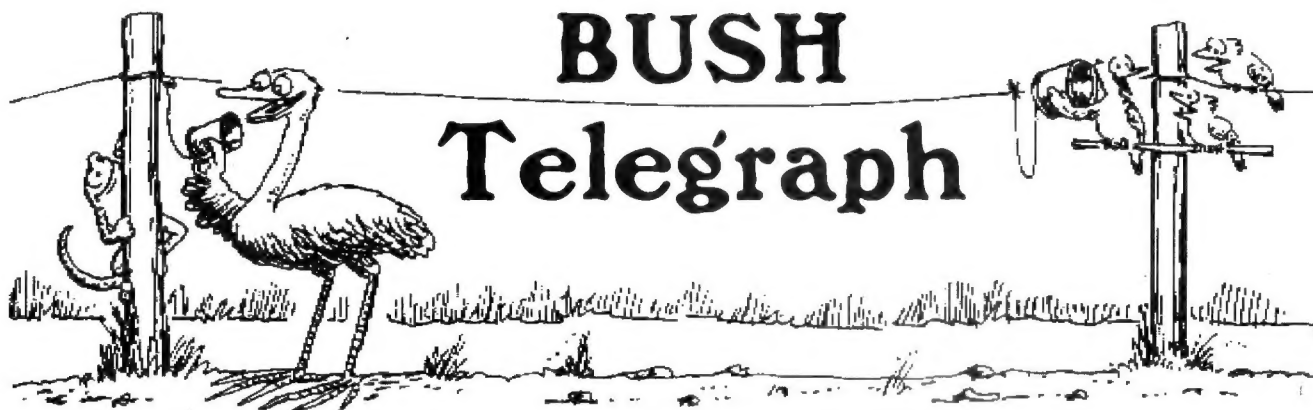
Hi everyone,

It is time I replaced a few of the magazines I have lent to friends but not received back. Also my daughter needs a couple of early issues as she is not prepared to wait until I am no longer on this earth to inherit my library of *Earth Garden* magazines.

I first discovered this great magazine in the mid-1970s, when I found a couple of 1973 issues being thrown out at a school fete. It was not long after that, that I started my collection, and for over 30 years have made sure that I get each and every edition of the magazine.

**Marion Brady, Rockhampton, Qld.**

**Earth People Write  
continues on page 68**



**Any news items which may interest Earth Gardeners may be submitted to *Bush Telegraph*. Please send notice of meetings, festivals and gatherings well in advance of the events.**

### **Biolytix Wins Global Award**

The Australian-invented wastewater treatment system, Biolytix Technologies, profiled in EG 128, has just been awarded a Global Eco-Tech Award at the World Expo in Japan. The award is judged by world leaders in their field and is given to "globally significant environmental technologies that contribute significantly to the resolution of global environmental problems and the realisation of a sustainable future". Biolytix was the only sewage and greywater treatment system to win in the world. It demonstrated innovation and "novelty appropriate to society in the 21st Century and universality that makes it useful in different societies".

The company will receive 1,000,000 YEN (making them millionaires!). This is about \$12,000. Managing Director and inventor of Biolytix, Dean Cameron, will be going to the award ceremony at the World Expo in Japan in September.

### **AUSBALE Takes Off**

AUSBALE is a non-profit organisation dedicated to promoting strawbale construction. Its members includes builders, owner builders, architects, engineers, and those interested in strawbale buildings, sustainable building practices, healthy homes and preservation of the environment. Ausbale have a vast body of knowledge not only in strawbale building but in all aspects of sustainable building technologies. They are constantly seeking to expand and build on that knowledge and expertise as well as to promote strawbale building within the community.

AUSBALE have launched their web page at: [www.ausbale.org](http://www.ausbale.org). There is lots of information, plus discussion boards for both newcomers to strawbale and industry professionals and tradespeople. For members of Ausbale there is also access to other technical information and support. "Why not join online and be part of this

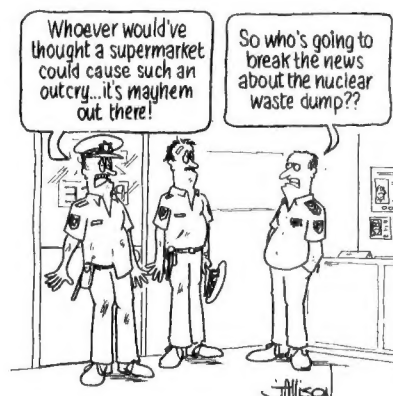
like minded community?" says AUSBALE President, Chris Newton.

Ausbale is also having a national straw house day, aiming to open a strawbale house in most large regions throughout Australia and New Zealand this November. Locations and dates are being finalised, and details will be found on the web page.

### **Residents Blockade Maleny Site**

Police and protesters have opposed each other as concrete trucks started rolling into a supermarket construction site at Maleny in Queensland's Sunshine Coast hinterland on 15 July. Four people were arrested that day as the issue became a national symbol of country townsfolk protecting their streetscapes from faceless multinational supermarket takeovers. The EcoTax from the previous issue of EG was donated to the Maleny residents to help in their fight to stop the town being transformed from a pretty hilltop village into yet another faceless, plastic-looking, shopping destination.

On 15 July police removed protesters from the road and formed a human barricade around the truck allowing it to move onto the site. Concrete foundations are being poured near an area where protesters say platypus burrows exist.



### **Lawsuits Allege Teflon Risks Hidden**

A series of lawsuits filed in United States courts in late July against DuPont claim the chemical giant covered up for decades health risks of non-stick teflon used in cookware around the world. The suits filed as class actions could potentially involve millions of US consumers, according to lawyers involved in the case.

"The class of potential plaintiffs could well contain almost every American who has purchased a pot or pan coated with DuPont's non-stick coating, popularly known as Teflon," lawyer, Alan Kluger, said. "The suits allege that the chemical and manufacturing giant knew for more than 20 years that teflon and its component chemicals had the potential to make people sick and hid that fact from consumers," a statement from the law firms Kluger, Peretz, Kaplan and Berlin, and Oppenheim Pilelsky said. Responding to the lawsuits, DuPont said in a statement it "will vigorously defend itself against the allegations raised in this lawsuit. Like any household product, cookware coated with teflon non-stick is safe when used properly. Teflon is a trusted brand and is used all over the world by millions of people every day. Independent US public agencies have studied non-stick coatings and have approved their use," said DuPont.

—Agence France Presse, 20 July.

### **Strawbale Fire Test Report**

Busy strawbale builders and advocates, Frank Thomas and Ingrid Leusch, have some fascinating news for strawbalers this season. The couple have translated into English the recent German report on fire tests for strawbale construction. These comprehensive tests were initiated by the German Strawbale Building Association (FASBA). The tests confirm a fire rating of F90 and meet German Construction Regulations, which are quite tough compared to

some other countries.

It is hoped that this certified translation of the fire tests will be accepted by Australian (and other international) building officials and help strawbale construction to be approved through council applications, especially since fire safety regulations have been made tougher in some States of Australia. These official tests are very expensive and it would help the international strawbale construction community if the same or similar tests do not have to be duplicated in different countries. For a copy of this test report contact Frank or Ingrid (see below). For a fee of Australian \$185 they will provide a copy of the original German report plus a copy of the certified English translation. The document also includes ten attachments showing tables and diagrams of the test results. The money will help pay for the couple's expenses (the certified translation, copies of the document, postage and handling) plus a donation to FASBA will be made with each copy sold.

Frank and Ingrid's website has recently changed to [www.strawtec.com.au](http://www.strawtec.com.au). Finally, a fascinating German strawbale book has been translated into English. The English title is *Building with Straw: Design and Technology of a Sustainable Architecture*, 2005, published by Birkhäuser-Publishers of Architecture, Switzerland. You can contact Frank & Ingrid, at Yesterday-Today-Tomorrow, Strawbale Construction, on (phone and fax): (02) 4443 5282, mobile: 0408415806, email: [strawbales@bigpond.com](mailto:strawbales@bigpond.com).

### The Gunns 20 Fight For Free Speech

Tasmania's largest woodchipping company, Gunns, allege that Bob Brown, Peg Putt, The Wilderness Society and a total of 20 defendants have been involved in campaigns against it. They filed a 216-page writ in the Victorian Supreme Court on 13 December 2004 seeking total damages of more than \$6 million. The case alleges conspiracy, interference with trade and business and defamation. Nine different campaigns are cited. The defendants include well-known environment campaigners such as: Alec Marr, Geoff Law, Russell Hanson, Leanne Minshull, Helen Gee, Huon Valley Environment Centre, and Doctors for Native Forests Inc.

The case may take years to conclude. The defendants and their supporters face enormous costs, money, time, stress and worry. The outpouring of public support for the defendants is enormously heartening, with offers of all kinds of help. Do not be silenced — the Gunns 20 campaign

stands for democracy, free speech and the protection of Tasmania's forests. Money can be donated to any or all of the defendants by donating to the Gunns 20 Fund via Senator Bob Brown. Cheques or money orders can be made out to Bob Brown (Gunns 20) — please include all contact details (for receipts) and post to GPO Box 1562 Hobart, 7000, or in person at the Greens Shop 230 Liverpool St, Hobart. For more information call (03) 6234 1633.

You can also donate to The Wilderness Society to help its defence by phoning 1800 030 641 or send cheques or money orders made out to The Wilderness Society to GPO Box 716, Hobart, Tas 7001, or at your closest Wilderness Society Shop or Campaign centre. You can also write to the newspapers and ring talkback radio. Consume wisely, and check that your money does not support Gunns Pty Ltd.

In July the Gunns 20 struck a blow to Gunns when the Gunns statement of claim was thrown out of court. Gunns' lawyers must now submit a new claim, which may or may not be thrown out too.



### Gembrook Sustainable Market

Artisans and craftspeople who can turn junk or unwanted goods into new, useful, artistic and interesting items, are wanted by the organisers of Gembrook's market. The market, which will be one of only a few within Australia that promotes sustainable living, will highlight that 'reworked' materials can be wanted commodities in the 21st century. Gembrook Market will be held on the 4th Sunday of the month next to Puffing Billy Station in the Dandenongs town of Gembrook, east of Melbourne. Interested stallholders can contact Merle Mathisen on (03) 5968 1011 (between 1 and 5pm) or for further information, Charlene Hosemans on (03) 5968 1321.

### Tallowood Hand Made Houses Tour

On the 24 and 25 September 2005, Tallowood School will be hosting its Tenth Annual Hand Made Houses Tour. Over the past nine years this popular tour has seen participation by many hundreds of people. Numerous travellers return each year to be further inspired and informed. The tour consists of a two-day self-drive tour around the beautiful Nambucca Valley, visiting and inspecting up to 20 "alternative/unique" homes, buildings and gardens. On view will be homes of stone and wood construction, mudbrick, sandstone block, strawbale, mud and sawdust packing and pole houses, featuring the use of solar power, recycled and reject materials. Owner builders will be available for discussions on the special aspects of their homes. This is a rare chance for people to experience an exhibition of skilled, hand-crafted, individual constructions.

As in previous years, the very popular "Travellers Dinner/Information Evening" will be held on the Saturday night at Tallowood School, which is also featured in the tour. Guest speakers will discuss the tour with other tour participants. Tallowood's famous international and home cooking will be available for a reasonable price and reservations are necessary.

Tour booklets, which contain information, photos and maps, are available for just \$50 per car for the two days: forward a cheque or money order for \$50 made payable to: Tallowood School, 220 Bellingen Road, Bowraville, NSW, 2449. Booklets will also be available on both days at Tallowood School. For enquiries contact the numbers below: Tallowood School, phone/fax (02) 6564 7619 or email, [tallowood\\_school@yahoo.com.au](mailto:tallowood_school@yahoo.com.au); or Niome Lawler, phone: (02) 6564 7948, email: [niomelawler@aol.com](mailto:niomelawler@aol.com).

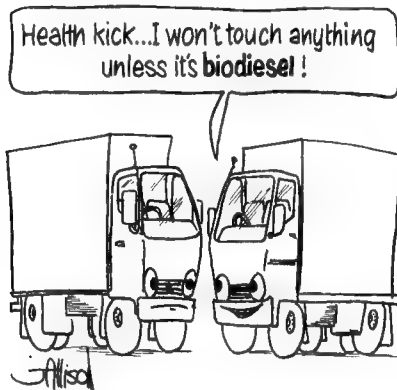
### Biodiesel Plant Started

Australian Renewable Fuels Limited begins construction of its \$15 million, leading edge, biodiesel plant in South Australia later this year. The alternative fuels company, which listed on the ASX recently, is building the first commercial plant of its kind in Australia.

ARFUELS Managing Director, Mr Darryl Butcher, says the plant will employ 30 people directly with up to 100 jobs flowing indirectly from the investment. Located on a 1.5 hectare property at Port Adelaide, the plant will be operating by November. After that a second plant in Picton, Western Australia, will be built. Each plant will produce at full capacity, 44 million litres of biodiesel per annum.

Biodiesel is a transport fuel that can be used in most modern diesel vehicles without modification. Mr Butcher likens the production process to the manufacturing of margarine and said the Port Adelaide facility will have more in common with a margarine plant than any conventional oil refinery. The SA State Government is currently undertaking a trial of biodiesel — which produces 60 per cent less particulate pollution and reduces carbon monoxide by nearly 50 per cent — in Adelaide's bus and train fleet.

"Biodiesel is the only alternative technology that can turn an existing transport fleet into a renewably-fuelled one overnight, and its environmental benefits are unquestioned," Mr Butcher said. He told the conference that ARFUELS, which has raised more than \$50 million in the past year, is forecast to record a post-tax profit of \$7 million in its maiden year of listing.



### Japanese Oldgrowth Woodchip Ban

The Forest Industries Association says the future of oldgrowth logging in Tasmania could be under threat (yay!) because a Japanese paper mill decision to stop buying woodchips from oldgrowth forests could be adopted by other international companies. In June, Mitsubishi published its new policy to only source woodchips from plantation forests. Alec Marr from The Wilderness Society says it will now lobby the two other Japanese paper mills to follow suit. "I think they've set an important lead which Oji and Nippon need to follow. Japanese customers can get the woodchips they need from plantations and still keep jobs in the timber industry and with far less environmental damage. Mitsubishi have shown that that's the case and we're hoping that Nippon and Oji will follow Mitsubishi's lead in this area."

Terry Edwards from the Forest Industries Association says there is the potential for oldgrowth logging to end if pressure

from conservationists is increased. — ABC.

### Childers Chookfest

The town of Childers in Queensland will hold its inaugural Chookfest in the first weekend of September 2005. Come along for a great weekend of music, displays, art, food and competitions. Anyone interested in participating (demonstrations, displays, stalls or art show entries) can contact the Childers Arts Council at PO Box 539, Childers, 4660, or email Tony Elton at [tonyanddilys@bigpond.com](mailto:tonyanddilys@bigpond.com) or phone the Arts Council on (07) 4126 1581 or (07) 4126 6428.

### Cloth Nappies

The cloth nappy scene in Australia (and New Zealand) has exploded in the past three years with locally made, fitted, pocket and all-in-one nappies finally becoming readily available here. Check the website at: [www.modernnappies.org](http://www.modernnappies.org) to join this thriving cloth nappy support, discussion and information group of over 300 members, and growing by the day.

### Hawkesbury Sustainability Fair

The fifth Hawkesbury Earthcare Sustainability Fair will be held at the Hawkesbury EarthCare Centre, University of Western Sydney, Hawkesbury Campus, NSW on 17 September. The fair is dynamic celebration of lifestyle and technology options for anyone interested in developing their own sustainable future. Visit the beautiful Hawkesbury Valley for a day of workshops, displays, entertainment, fine food, music, children's activities, a wildlife show, market stalls, together with seminars and hands on practical advice. Topics include organic growing, permaculture, ecodesign building, energy and water conservation and how to live a more satisfying lifestyle. Email: [info@earthcare.org.au](mailto:info@earthcare.org.au), contact Eric Brocken, or phone (02) 45678424, or website: [www.earthcare.org.au](http://www.earthcare.org.au) for more details.

### Six Star Council Building

CH2 is the only building in Australia to be awarded a six star rating under the Green Building Council of Australia's Green Star Rating Tool. As the Green Star rating is comparable with other rating tools used overseas, CH2 is believed to be the Greenest building of its kind in the world. The building recently won a World Environment Day award from the United Nations Association. The sustainable features of CH2 include: a water mining plant in the basement that will use membrane filtered sewer water to reduce mains water supply; phase change materials for cooling; auto-

matic windows that will open at night to cool the building; vaulted concrete ceilings that will improve air circulation, cooling and natural light harvesting; a façade of louvres that will track the sun to shade the Western façade; and, the use of wind turbines to draw hot air out of the building. The building is situated at 200 Little Collins Street, Melbourne. For more information on CH2 visit their website at: [www.CH2.com.au](http://www.CH2.com.au).

### Greywater Recycling Project For Subdivision

While the Queensland Government has just recommended people cut their mains water use by 5 per cent, the Silvapark subdivision development is expected to cut it by 75 per cent.

Silvapark (at The Gap, Brisbane) is the first greywater recycling project in Queensland to be implemented at a subdivision scale. Although Premier Beattie is suggesting recycling greywater is the way ahead, it has been illegal on sewered properties in Queensland since 2000. This greywater legislation changed in July this year and Silvapark is leading the way. It is deemed a 'Special Case Site' by Brisbane City Council because it demonstrates state-of-the-art sustainability initiatives.

The 22-house 'Green-street project' is designed with smart, integrated water management infrastructure. Stage 1 (six houses) has just been completed. The infrastructure, mainly installed by Biolytix Technologies, includes each home having the award-winning Biolytix greywater recycler. This recycles not only greywater from the kitchen, bathroom and laundry but can also recycle all food scraps through an In-Sink-Erator. All of this is converted into high quality irrigation water for each garden.

There is also a (filtered inlet) rainwater tank for each house; a pressure pump and rainwater filter/disinfection system for each house; communal storage tanks of up to 400,000 litres to collect the overflow from each house tank, and 'top-up' residents' tanks as needed; and any excess water can be used off-site.

The Biolytix Grey Water Recycler offers a 20-year guarantee of high quality, safe irrigation water. Unlike many other systems, it has been tested and approved to recycle the 'dark grey' water from the kitchen. And they do not rely on the user being committed to clean filters and to change their lifestyle habits. Biolytix was a double winner on ABC TV's 'The New Inventors'. For more information on Silvapark visit: [www.silvapark.com.au](http://www.silvapark.com.au), and for more information on Biolytix visit: [www.biolytix.com](http://www.biolytix.com).

# Home, Green-Office Home

After many years of publishing articles about solar power, strawbale houses, independent water supplies, and other subjects dear to the hearts of *Earth Gardeners*, *Earth Garden* is finally moving into its new eco-friendly home. In this issue and the next, *Earth Garden* editor, Alan T Gray, describes how the magazine staff designed and oversaw construction of their dream, energy-efficient office in the cold central highlands 100 km north-west of Melbourne.

by Alan T Gray  
*Trentham, Victoria.*

**W**E NEVER intended to build a new office — we always planned to renovate the old one. By 1992 the *Earth Garden* office was bulging at the seams in a room in our house in the bush near Trentham in central Victoria. So that year we moved into a tumbledown Victorian cottage in Trentham and that's where we've produced the past 50-odd issues of the magazine.

Last year it finally dawned on me that it was not really possible to work full-tilt producing *Earth Garden* in an office that was simultaneously being renovated. And boy — does our old office need renovating. For a start the toilet is legendary for its 'al fresco' aspect. The house needs restumping, rewiring, replumbing, reroofing, and re-everything else you can think of. But it's full of character and seems to resonate with the eery whispers of countless tense magazine deadlines as we've battled with cranky computers and laser printers to produce the magazine on time each issue.

Each EG staff member has their very own list of things they dislike about the old office so when it came time to draw up a list of features and designs we wanted in

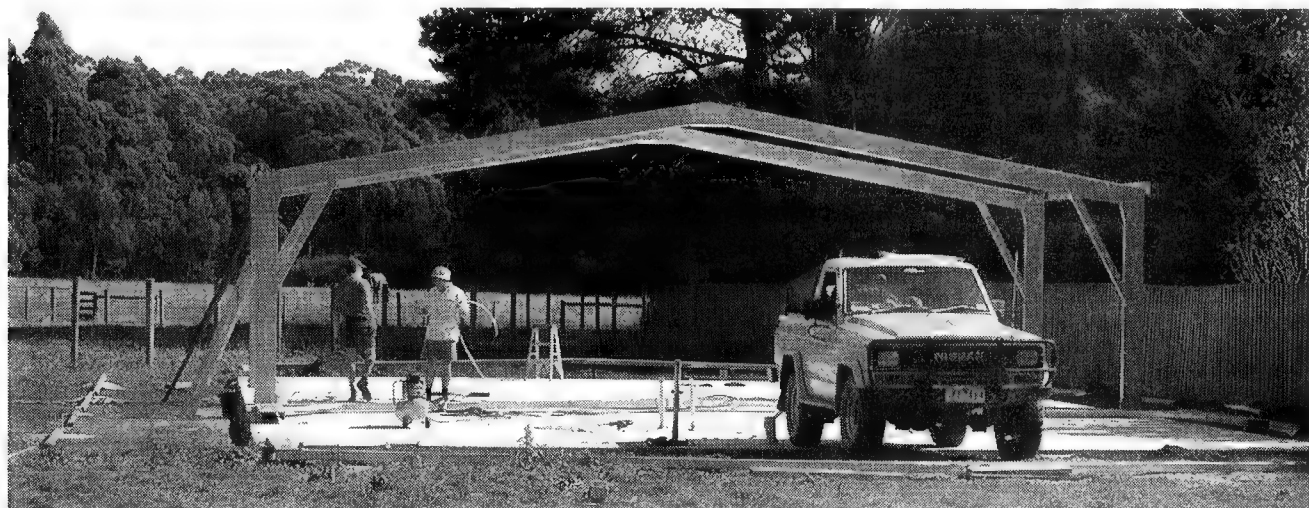
a new office, it was a quick and easy task.

At Christmas last year we did a few 'back of the envelope' floor plan sketches, and attached our wish list. Top of the list was 'maximum natural light', followed by 'maximum insulation and passive solar design' (we were sick of freezing in winter!), and the list continued with other wishes like an eco-friendly natural power system and so on.

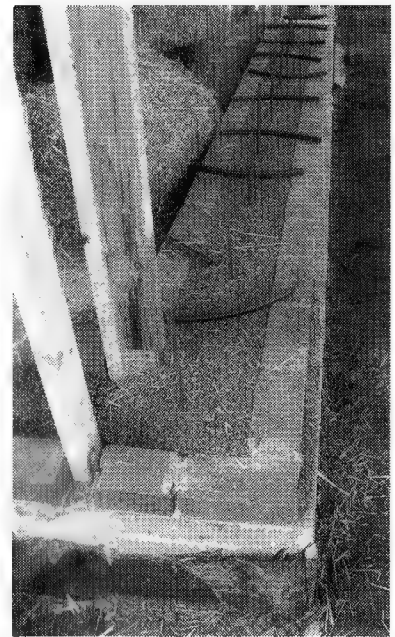
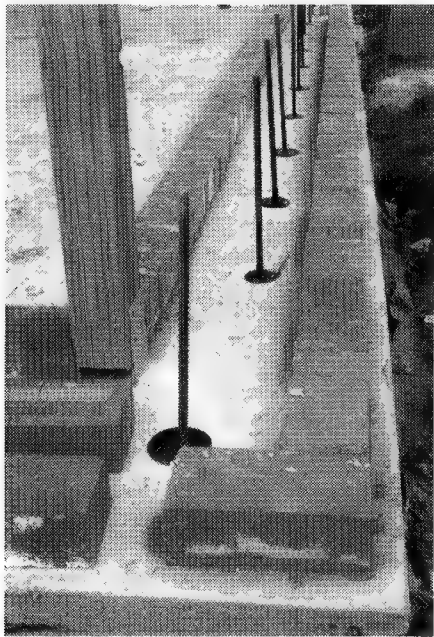
It was easy to agree on a strawbale office with a concrete slab and recycled doors and windows, exclusive use of plantation and recycled timbers, and a grid-connected solar power system.

We posted our sketches to environment campaigner and architect, Marcus Ward, (see EG 132) and in a few weeks he came up with detailed plans ready for a building permit.

All this sounds easy and manageable, and so far it was. We were pretty good at coming up with a wish list, but we knew that because we all have lives to lead, families to see, and other projects to manage (ranging from Karen's full time commitment to horses, home renovating, teaching piano, and other projects, Doug running his own business — Green Graphics — in Castlemaine, and my family addicted to their winter outback camping holidays) we weren't going to have time to build the office ourselves.



The steel frame went up in three days, complete with roofing colorbond and guttering.



The footings for the strawbale walls: a double course of bricks (left) with damp-proof membrane over the row of reo bars embedded in the slab (centre) and then back-filled with gravel for drainage and with poly pipe 'slots' to hold the lengths of fencing wire which will eventually wrap around the strawbales for tensioning (right).

## Off the shelf office

We also wanted to build an 'off the shelf' Green office that anyone in Australia could modify and replicate without requiring specialist materials or skills. We wanted people to look at our office and believe that they could have one just as Green without needing a degree in environmental science to work out what should be included and what wasn't Green.

Marcus advised us to use a standard steel shed frame and slab and go for infill strawbale walls built and rendered by the unflappable Andy Baker from Country Spray Render in central Victoria. Andy has rendered more than 60 strawbale buildings in southern Australia in the past five years and his skill, knowledge and easy going approach to strawbale building is very reassuring. He quickly worked out the best way to strawbale and render our shed frame and was very happy for us to be workshop assistants on site whenever we could manage the time. Perfect.

By chance Andy was rendering a strawbale house about 100 metres from our old and new office sites and we were able to get a good look at his team's handiwork before we proceeded. Checking out any builder's previous work is vital if you're not owner-building everything yourself.

## Solar power

The new office site, just around the corner from the old office, is shaded for half the day by giant pine trees lining the neighbouring footy ground, so the site is not ideal from a passive (or active) solar perspective. But it's still

not bad, so we were delighted to have Ernest Gavey from Solazone install a 1500 watt BP Solar grid-interactive solar power system.

This brilliant system generates solar power to run about half to two thirds of the office's power requirements, and the rest is drawn into the office from the mains power grid out in the street. But when the solar panels are producing more power than we're consuming, say at weekends or quiet times, the inverter will switch and feed the solar power back into the grid.

We then get a credit from the local power company for the solar power we've generated, which reduces our mains power bill, and effectively turns the office into a mini solar power station. What a buzz.

The BP Solar 'Energizer 1500' kit is an 'off the shelf' package with all components matched to interact perfectly for a fully automatic power system. We suspect we may be able to generate a lot more than half our power needs from the BP system and we'll publish progress reports over the next year or so as we get familiar with its workings and how to maximise its efficiency. In the next issue of *Earth Garden* we'll also present a full profile of the system, how Solazone installed it, and what any householder can expect from such a system.

With such little need for hot water we decided against a solar hot water unit, although if our office had been a family home we would definitely have installed one. We have lived in a small clearing near Trentham with solar hot water for more than ten years and it's amazing how efficient our Beasley unit was — even well into winter.



**Earth Garden publisher, Judith Gray, and Andy Baker of Country Spray Render place a length of reo mesh on top of a half stacked wall. The reo will help with compressing the bales, and is tied to timber posts at each end of the wall.**

## Sun Lizard

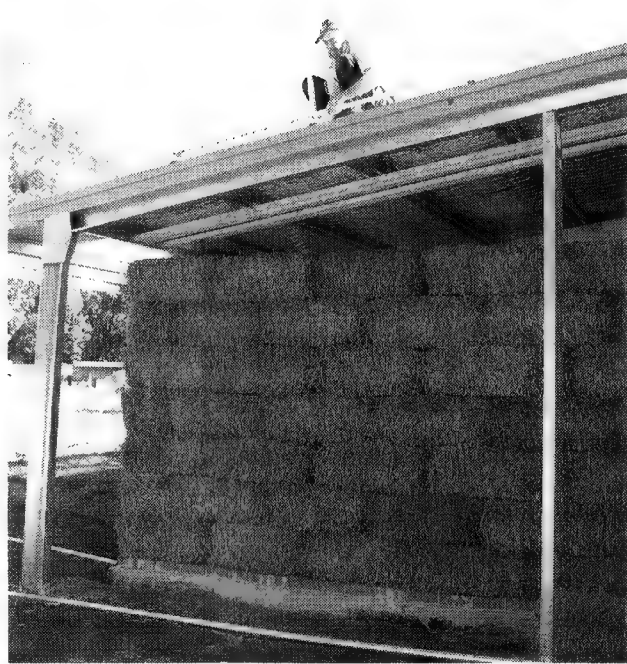
The Sun Lizard is an Australian-invented solar air heater. It's like a solar hot water unit but instead of heating water it heats the air inside large collectors and then a solar-powered fan pumps the warm air into your house. In summer the fan can be reversed to extract hot air from your roof space and draw cool air into the building (perhaps from a fernery on a shady south side).

We are very excited to have such a clever and passive solar heating system installed and look forward to publishing more details about the Sun Lizard once it's up and running. The thermal mass of the slab floor, the super-insulated strawbale walls, and R6 insulated ceilings mean that the Sun Lizard may not need much help to heat the entire office area on sunny days in winter — we'll see.

Judith scored a house lot of recycled doors and windows at a demolition yard in Bendigo and these were promptly measured and delivered. We also decided that the warehouse doors might be nice as a translucent roll-a-door — remember that maximum light doctrine — but the cost was prohibitive so by the time you read this we'll have hunted up some some recycled French doors (we hope).

## Construction

At the 2004 *Earth Garden* staff Christmas dinner when we tossed around office designs and made our wish lists, our cocky Advertising Manager, Doug Falconer, loudly announced that there was “no way” this pie-in-the-sky new office would be built any time soon. For some reason I responded to this little challenge, and a \$50 bet emerged:



**Ernest Gavey of Solazone fixes scaffolding in place so he can install the ten BP Solar 150 watt panels.**

if the office was functioning by 1 September 2005, Doug would pay up. If it wasn't I would.

After our Christmas wish list, January architect plans, February building approval and concrete slab, we were well on track for a new office when the frame was built by mid-March. We were very lucky to score two local blokes — Ross Fox and his son Chris — who happened to be the shed frame erectors. They did a great job and everyone is impressed by the simple design of the shed frame. This was about the time Doug started to get a little nervous about his \$50, and I started to feel a little cocky. However, over the months from March till now — as I write in mid-August — my hopes of winning this bet have see-sawed like a politician's poll rating.

By mid-May we were ready for one of the truly big days of the project: stacking the strawbales to build the external walls. Andy showed us how to use bale pins and baling twine to make half bales. He also showed us how to notch out a bale with a chainsaw to fit around a post. We all pitched in to turn an empty space into the entire southern wall of our own office. What a buzz! Helping to build your own office is definitely exciting and empowering — especially when it will end up eco-friendly and energy efficient.

In a few hours we'd created some very impressive walls ready for tensioning and to be tied to nearby frame posts.

## Solar system

The day Ernest Gavey and his crew arrived with ten big beautiful BP photovoltaic panels was another day of great excitement on the building site. We helped Ernest remove

them from their big cardboard boxes — it felt like Christmas. Then we passed them up to Ernest on the roof one at a time and he and his staff — complete with special safety scaffolding — carefully fixed the steel brackets, and then the panels, to the roof. The two-way inverter, that converts the 'solar power into household power' looked great bolted next to our electricity meter, and we can't wait for Ernest to come back and 'throw the switch' for the final 'buzz'.

What many people don't realise is that a grid-connected system like this BP Solar Energizer unit is available to nearly any householder in Australia who has mains power and is able to borrow (or spend) the money to install it. Nearly every retail electricity company and authority in Australia allows its customers to install grid-interactive systems which will start to massively reduce the Greenhouse gas emissions of any household. I also like the idea of thousands of Australian households becoming mini solar power stations.

If you really want to reduce your Greenhouse gas emissions in an existing house, install a solar hot water unit. If you've already done that, insulate your ceilings, walls, windows and doors. Next, you might consider installing a small grid-connected solar electric system like the BP Energizer kit, which also comes in two sizes smaller than our 1500 watt system: 500 watts and 1000 watts.

Of course, all this costs big bucks, and Earth Garden's strange lack of glossy advertisements for new cars, appliances and other consumer must-haves probably explains why cashflow is always an issue in keeping a small magazine afloat. We have borrowed the full cost of building our new office and the bank seems to believe us when we say we plan to be around for at least another 25 years publishing EG, because that's the term of our loan! We promise not to double the cost of the magazine to pay for our eco-luxury.

## Late progress

As I write this, we have just had the next big step in the project: Andy has spray rendered the walls. This happened while my family and I are camping in the Great Sandy Desert and when I speak to Karen, our Office Manager, she tells me it was exhausting but exhilarating holding the spray gun and making the bare strawbale turn into lime-rendered walls, as she worked. We are impatiently waiting for the walls to dry (no mean feat in Trentham in August!) so Andy can apply two more coats. Then we will install the windows and doors, whack down some carpet, and move in! Sounds simple, but it's a little more complex than that, and I'll tell you if I win my bet in the summer issue of *Earth Garden*.

Woo-hoo!

## ➡ Your Health

## ➡ Your Home

## ➡ BIO Paints



*Indoor pollution is a growing concern. A main contributor is conventional paint products.*

*But here is the good news for You. Bio's natural and non toxic paints will create a healthier home.*

*Do You want to use these environmental responsible products? They are easy to use, of high quality and have no bad smell.*

*Phone us on our Freecall Number*

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# Living In Fowl Times

by Alanna Moore

**From Transylvanian naked necks to Araucanas — Alanna welcome reader' queries about living with chooks. Write to Earth Garden, PO Box 2 Trentham, Vic, 3458 or email <info@earthgarden.com.au>.**



**H**ELLO Chook Lovers. Happy springtime! A busy time in chook world for those of you planning to have some spring chickens. Time for some spring cleaning and disinfecting of nest and nursery areas. Do you have some fresh ground for chicks to graze on? Preferably an area that has been chook-free for six months or more, to break parasite (like intestinal worm) cycles.

Breeding season provides wonderful educational experiences for children: the excitement of eggs hatching, the miracle of life unfolding before their eyes. What better way of making a connection with nature and of getting involved with food production, which most kids haven't an inkling of! And from the cycles of routine responsibilities, the nurturing of other life come the tasty rewards, fresh from the fry pan.

When it comes to watching your precious eggs hatch (especially when artificially incubating) a chick may struggle to get out of the shell, but it's usually wisest to let it fight it's own battle. Sprinkle some water over it, if perhaps the shell membrane is too dry to break through, but don't help it out. It will most likely die later, even if you do help, as it is not strong enough. The fittest will survive without our help. Children can learn about care and compassion when keeping animals, but there is no room for sentimentality in nature. Death is as natural as life.

## Chook houses

*Dear Alanna,*

We'd like to add a couple of chooks to our little household, but unfortunately between the two of us, our

woodworking and construction skills are a little lacking.

We would appreciate any advice (and especially designs/plans) for small-scale chook houses that we could apply, given our willingness to learn yet lack of construction knowledge.

My parents and grandparents kept Plymouth Rock chickens, with beautiful striped plumage and roosters with deafening crows. A feature on these chooks would be interesting to see, as they seem to be quite rare these days. Thanks very much, Bindi Weir, Western Australia.

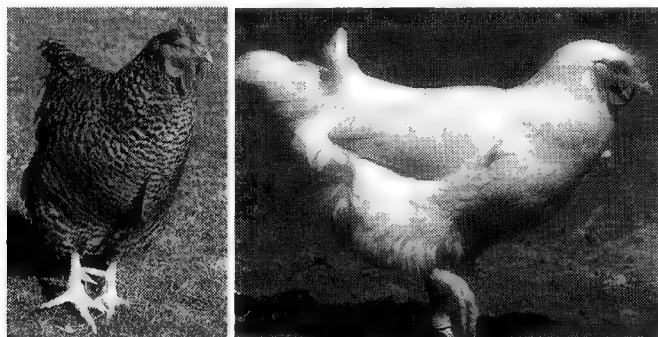
*Dear Bindi,*

Alas the Plymouth Rock is one of many precious heritage breeds now in decline. An admirable variety, it's big and beefy too – a dual-purpose bird for eggs or eating. With a friendly temperament on the whole, it is placid enough to be easily contained. The Rock is hardy and long lived, hens are fair layers, while making excellent broodies and mums.

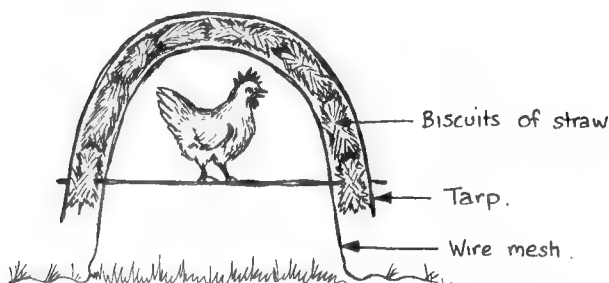
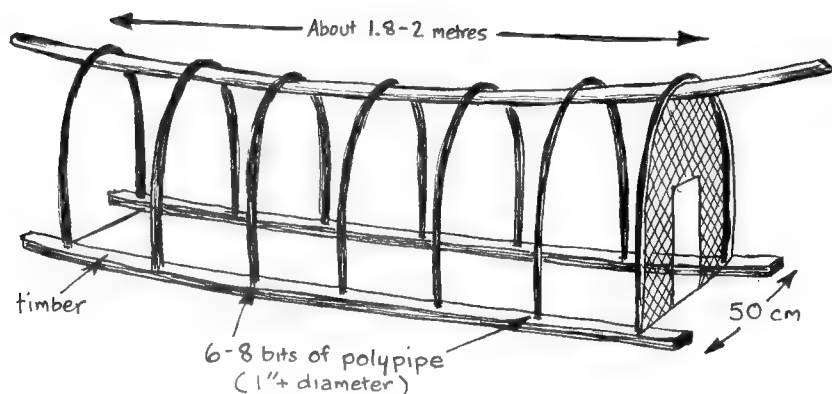
As for housing – a simple chook design comes to mind, in the form of a moveable tunnel shaped pen, which can be made cheaply out of scraps or offcuts of easily obtained materials. Anyone could knock one of these up and they are lightweight and practical, easy to move around the garden for essential "chook tractor" work.

You just need two lengths of timber, about two metres long. And about eight lengths of large size poly pipe – one inch or more diameter and about 1.5 metres long. The ends of the pipe are nailed to the timber pieces, which can then be joined with some tie wire or more wood. The hoops can be wired together in the upright position onto a tomato stake or equivalent, with its ends sticking out to act as a handles.

The resulting pen is then covered in 12mm (half-inch) bird wire or similar, and this should be spread out beyond the structure like a skirt, to deter burrowing animals gaining entry. Ends are covered with wire mesh or plywood, and a door fashioned on one or both ends. Then some round dowelling rod can be wedged in through the wire for perches and a tarp can cover one end for shade and shelter. In very hot or cold weather some biscuits of straw or blankets or whatever can be used to insulate the roof. Happy building!



**Left: Barred Rock Plymouth hens have beautiful striped plumage. Right: White Rock hens are hardy and long lived.**



A simple design in the form of a moveable tunnel shaped pen.

## Broken leg?

Dear Alanna,

I am in my eighth month of raising my first ever chooks (two), both from only day old, with only the help of your book *Backyard Poultry – Naturally*. I have come this far, though with some troubles that I worked my way through, and I am now stuck. Coming home from work one day I found one of my chooks lying down in the coop half on her side (she's a very big chook). Upon coming closer I found her to be immobile, as her right leg was just floppy. She tries to move small distances by hopping and flapping her wings – it's terrible watching her! She looks happy and healthy otherwise.

She's been like this four days now – the only improvement I've noticed is that she can now stand on that leg a few seconds, and hobbles several metres to sit under her favourite mango tree.

Does this sound like a broken leg? How can I tell? In your book you mentioned to apply a splint using elder wood, and a strip of old nylon pantyhose and some sticking plaster. Is it important for the wood to be elder? Where can I find this type of wood? Can I use bandages from my first aid box rather than the pantyhose? Also, what is sticking plaster? Would it heal if I just left her? Is it possible that she just sprained her ankle?

Our local vet said they don't specialise with birds. I live in suburban Sydney, and use the free range system.

Also, I was hoping you could let me know what breed my much-loved hens are! The brown one lays brown eggs (and seems to be a very good layer: pretty much an egg a day since December). The white one lays creamy, but not white, large eggs, but tends to have more days off from laying than the other giving

an average of five eggs a week. She was rescued from a tipped 'Ingham' truck.

Any advice is MUCH appreciated!

Many thanks, Szilvia.

Hi Szilvia,

Well I don't think I could attempt such a long distance diagnosis, so I'll accept yours. I assume you have felt the leg for breaks. I wonder how she broke it?

The elder wood treatment is an example of an old, traditional remedy. Use whatever flexible twig you can find, or an ice-cream stick or equivalent. Any bandages are better than none, and better to try anything that com-



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**Barnevelder hens: flighty but entertaining chooks.**

mon sense suggests than allow suffering. She should be confined in a small space while in recovery mode, with all her needs provided close by. (And if she turns out to be instead diseased – lameness can be a sign of Mareks disease – all the better to have her quarantined.)

Sounds like you have the high egg laying hybrid breeds, bred for factory farming, and not always tough or smart in the survival game, as a consequence. As I am morally opposed to all things pertaining to factory farming, I can only say in full prejudice that a pure bred, heritage variety of fowl is a far fairer friend to have.

## Balding Barnies

*Dear Alanna,*

Four months ago I became the proud owner of three Barnevelder pullets (approximately 18 weeks old). Since that time at least one of or all of them has had bald patches. I am unsure whether this is a combination of moulting and/or some other problem. I do notice that two of them, one more than the other will peck out the feathers of the other birds and eat them, specifically the feathers on the hen's back just above the tail feathers. The culprits are the two hens that are laying; the third hen has yet to lay an egg, I don't really know why.

I thought this feather plucking could perhaps be due to a protein deficiency so I started feeding a mash in the mornings made with milk powder to increase their pro-

tein intake. When this didn't seem to make a difference I thought it could be boredom and have tried to vary their day's entertainment but this doesn't seem to have made a difference either. I then thought the birds could have a mite infestation and treated them and their nesting boxes with a mite dust. This seems to have made things worse. After treating them yesterday afternoon I got home from work today to find that the second layer is now missing a considerable portion of her feathers, having a bare band between her head, neck, chest and her tail and vent. The other laying bird was obviously pursuing her, removing even the feathers from her legs.

I don't really know what to do about this problem. Getting a rooster is out of the question as it is not allowed by my local council. Any suggestions are very welcome. Many thanks, Louise.

*Louise,*

Hens can learn some pretty awful vices. You have taken some sensible measures against the problem. But you don't say what sort of lifestyle they have. Free ranging birds are less prone to this problem, which can be very difficult to stop.

Many people simply cull the repeat offenders, because if it is not stopped it can lead to cannibalism. If you don't want to have to kill them, then give them a more interesting life, as feather picking can arise from plain old boredom.

Tie some bunches of greens in a bundle for them to jump up and peck at (if not free ranging) – comfrey is ideal, whilst also being high protein. Meat meal will give the best protein hit, even better if it is in the form of worms, beetles and bugs.

Good luck!

## Is humane treatment possible?

*Dear Alanna,*

I read an article you wrote about chooks in EG. I was impressed and wish to seek your advice. My wife and I live

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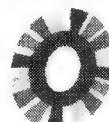


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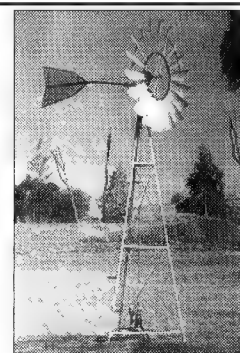
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in Sydney and we are planning to soon move to an acreage block on the fringe of Sydney. I am a vegetarian and wish to keep chooks for egg production only. I do not want to sell or dispose of my laying hens if possible but keep them for their full life span, hopefully laying for most of their lives, even if not at the battery rate. Is this possible?

I am convinced to use only natural, organic, free range and humane methods of producing eggs. Is this possible? What would be the best chook to buy for this kind of enterprise?

I also plan to sell eggs. Is this possible? Can you recommend feedstuffs? Or any books for relevant information? Thankyou, Rex Cosson.

*Dear Rex,*

You have noble ideals, but don't let your expectations get too high. Not expecting top performance is realistic. And do you intend to make money from selling eggs? You may only be lucky enough to cover your costs, in my experience. I even had gorgeous rare breeds of poultry to sell and unusual coloured eggs. Unless you can produce some of their feed, costs can be high for buying it in, especially in drought years.

Don't let me put you off... it's just that people don't always expect to pay the proper amount for produce these days. They buy crappy quality food that's mega-mass-produced and expect to pay next to nothing for it. However if you can develop a network of appreciative customers you might be able to charge quite a bit for naturally produced eggs, with selling them direct to the public.

## Chooks and polystyrene

*Alanna,*

I have chooks who insist on pecking my polystyrene plant boxes to pieces. Although their eggs are rich and regular, I've noticed from time to time that their eggshells are thin. I scatter shell grit and cuttlefish around and they free range about four acres of my 20 acres during the day, have grain for breakfast and organic mash with organic

fruit and vegetable scraps (including garlic) mixed in for tea. There is an abundance of food around their range and my girls coexist happily with four scrub chooks also sharing the gardens and bushland environment.

Could the polystyrene be damaging their health, and, through the eggs, damaging ours? I've now moved the boxes out of chook reach – just in case. Diana.

*Diana,*

Polystyrene boxes are so irresistible to chooks! I don't think that they are too wholesome though, so it is wise to keep them out of reach. (Growing vegetables in them may not be a good idea either...)

Here are some items you might like to add to their diet – blue metal dust for grit and minerals, and some granulated seaweed meal mixed in with their mash. Any other high calcium dietary items should help with the thin shells.

Please keep those letters about happy chooks rolling in folks!

Until next season, so long chookies.

Alanna's book *Backyard Poultry – Naturally* is available through the Good Life Book Club for \$38.50 + \$9.00 p&h.



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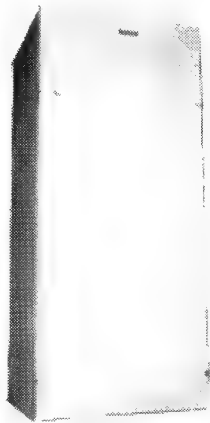
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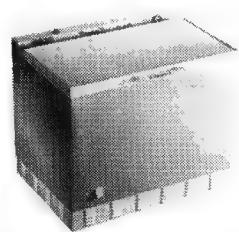
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# Confessions of a Weekend Hippy

## – Spring 2005 –



**On weekdays a mild-mannered corporate pillar, at weekends a vegie growing tree-hugger, Liz muses on the metaphysics of nature and some of the less expensive pleasures of life while cycling huge distances on her bicycle – the one with the makeup mirror.**

**by Liz Ingham**  
*Yarraville, Victoria.*

### Garden World

Much as I love the bush, and the absence of city, it's the garden that pulls me back here every weekend. It's like reading a really good book, where you can't wait to start the next chapter to see what happens. Each weekend I open the gate and find out.

During the week, the cast of characters writes the next page. Rain, possum raids, sunshine, coughs, insects, seeds germinating, earthworms, flowers opening, frogs awakening. I am not the only gardener here.

There are magical moments, like the time I pulled aside a curtain of peach leaves to surprise a tree-frog sitting on fruit like a hen on her eggs, or last spring when Trevor saw two large skinks in mortal combat in the peace-garden, or discovering that eggplant "Rosita" had set shiny enamelled fruit below velvet leaves.

In my long career as a tree-hugger, I've never imagined the tree gets something out of it; that's the attraction for me. I see wild nature, particularly the forest, as something that exists independently. In the little bits of forest that get preserved, I like to think of the animals and plants going about their lives, unaware that there ever was a campaign to save them.

The garden is a little different. This is a dynamic bit of nature we can interact with, but the beauty of it is that we can only do it on nature's own terms. Each gardening decision is made up of equal parts past experience, the moment you are living in, and a projection of the natural consequences of your actions.

You can't influence plants, insects or animals to be anything other than what they are. You can learn about them and encourage them, and make use of their inherent strengths,

but you can't force them to do anything. And isn't this the opposite of how humans treat the world and each other?

You could hire a lobbyist to convince a politician to pass legislation that all lettuces will henceforth be deep-rooted perennials, and it will rain in March, and possums will from this day relinquish use of their prehensile thumbs, but it won't do you any good. The garden is where we accept the limits of nature and work with them.

Imagine a world where we accepted nature's reality. Our view of everything would be different, from how we see retreating glaciers (debating their existence doesn't re-freeze them) to "disposable" polystyrene coffee cups (no such thing). In such a place, we would drop the financial report from the end of the news and replace it with something less fantastical,

and vote for the person who talks the most sense about nature and the natural consequences of our present actions, instead of the one that gives us the most hope that our unsustainable way of life is in fact sustainable.

I know we have this in us. That's why we love our gardens, and find a sense of peace and acceptance there, where the past and the future flow through this moment.

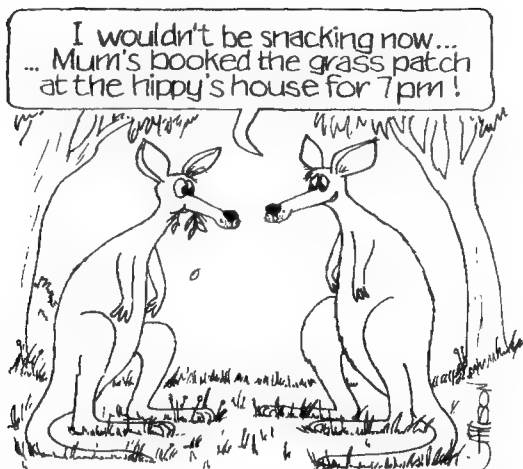


**"Rosita" in all her splendour.**

### Rusty

The autumn rains arrived in winter again this year (and a big hello to our friends at climate change); but even so, it's been amazing watching the property respond by turning from brown to green. I'm frightened to put my foot down in places where, a month ago, there was hard unyielding ground.

The green-ness couldn't come soon enough for the animals. Rusty took up the position of "house wallaby" when Swampy failed to return one spring (vale Swampy). This winter she is so gaunt I wouldn't recognise her, save for her distinctive markings. We've seen her lately, close to the house, hovering up the new growth.



She doesn't try to hide behind shrubs any more, which either means she's getting used to us, or she's so hungry she's past caring. I like to think Rusty feels safe here, and that's why the last two summers she brought her joeys to lounge around outside the kitchen window. They were very funny, with their big feet and little bodies, popping their heads up over the wallaby grass.

### Zoom zoom

I've just reached my target of 10,000 kilometres on my bicycle, so today I'm going to buy some fancy magnetic toe clips for the pedals, and a mirror. Trevor says the mirror's so I can put my lippy on while I'm riding. Oh, he is so bad. We looked up the atlas, and found that if I'd done 10,000 km all in a row I would have ridden up the coast from Melbourne, hung a left at Townsville, detoured to Darwin, then continuing along the coast, I would be free-wheeling south towards Perth around about now. Which is either a very exciting way of demonstrating how far I've gone or a way of showing the extent to which I'm going backwards and forwards on the spot.

Today when I rode to work, knowing I was going to get my prize, I sped up until I could feel the very bottom of my lungs. I rode and rode, and passed some other riders, and broke into a sweat, and when I lifted myself up

onto strong women's legs to power up the La Trobe Street bridge, I felt like there should have been a band playing! It's good, this cycling business.

Car advertisements on the telly try to sell you this feeling, but you can't get it in a car, even one with power windows and central locking.

### Spinning out

Recently I realised that my spinning wheel is an unnecessary cause of stress and tension in my life. In my mind, my hands move gracefully to the rhythm of the wheel, but in reality I end up consumed by buoyant clouds of alpaca fur, exhausting my available supply of swear words before the bobbin is full. This failure sits heavily on my shoulders, but I take comfort from two things.

One is that my mother before me failed at spinning, conceding defeat one night on stage singing Marguerite's spinning wheel song in the opera Faust, mourning her absent lover with a honeyed voice even as the golden plaits of her wig became irretrievably caught in the mechanism. She sang on bravely, her young face tilting a little further to the left with each verse. Spookily, the product of my own spinning wheel looks exactly like accidentally spun wig hair disentangled by someone singing in French.

My other comfort is that I will shortly be trying my hand at making mud walls, which is surely a patented hippy technology if ever there was one. More about that next time.



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# A Seed Planted by John Seymour

Hobart Earth Gardener, Peter Laud, reflects on how his family's life was changed forever by the powerful influence of the towering figure, John Seymour, who died last year after a long life devoted to environmental sustainability.

by Peter Laud

*Lindisfarne, Tasmania.*

ONE treasured and well-thumbed book holds a special place in my library. It's not a personal diary or a play by Shakespeare or one of the growing number of self-improvement books that have flooded the market in recent years.

Instead it's a book about hens, geese, ducks, cows and much more — the distilled experience of one man anxious to spread a message of self-reliance to others. *The Complete Book Of Self Sufficiency* was written by John Seymour who, back in the UK in the mid-seventies, was at least partly responsible for a flood of city dwellers leaving behind creature comforts, and in many cases secure jobs, for the uncertainty of a new life in the country — particularly the damp valleys of south Wales where property was then relatively cheap.

John Seymour came into my life during an otherwise routine drive to work. To relieve the tedium of traffic lights and nose to tail queues the radio provided a constant companion and on a Friday morning in August came the voice of a man who offered something different.



Janice milking Betty the cow.

John Seymour was talking about the idea and practice of something called self sufficiency and holding out the notion that it was possible to provide for yourself unsupported by the crutch of supermarkets. He was talking about growing crops, making bread, raising poultry, about working dawn to dusk and enjoying it. He was talking about taking control long before the buzz words of self-empowerment came into common use. Stuck in a traffic jam on the outskirts of a grim and grey Birmingham among an army of gloomy commuters, it seemed to make a good deal of sense.

Once at work my first phone call was to my wife, Janice, who was enjoying a day off from her physiotherapist job at the local hospital. I can remember what I told her: "Turn on the radio — there's this fantastic bloke called John Seymour."

By the time I got home that night she'd been out to buy Seymour's first book on self sufficiency. We argued over who should claim first reading rights and it was the best nine shillings and six pence we ever spent.

That book was with us when, 18 months later in 1976, we packed in our city-based jobs, sold our house and headed with high hopes for ten sloping acres and a damp cottage near Swansea.

By then Seymour had become if not our guru then an unseen guide and comforter. At every turn — building a chook shed, buying a first goat, planting cabbages, milking the Jersey cow that replaced the goat — we turned to Seymour's book. If Seymour said it then it had to be right and this opinion was shared by most of the other willing refugees from the city that we came across to try, with varying degrees of success, the self sufficiency trail.

Seymour never promised any of us a rose garden and he was right. We worked dawn to dusk rebuilding parts of the cottage, milking goats and later Betty — The Cow Who Wouldn't Stand Still (it turned out her mother had been christened Merrylegs), working a wind-blown garden, making cheese and butter and much more.

We never did become wholly self sufficient — coffee made from dandelion roots was an acquired taste and, despite the guiding hand of Seymour, killing one of our geese was such a repulsive experience we never tried again. To be wholly self sufficient seemed to require round-the-the-clock dedication, an ability to survive without sleep, a multitude of skills — and luck. But we went a fair way towards it, in the process, gaining an understanding of ourselves and others — that might have escaped us in the city.

To our eternal regret we never did meet The Man



**Peter, Betty the cow and Jesse the dog on the family's ten acre smallholding in south Wales.**

despite the fact that he was at the time living in an adjoining county with his artist wife Sally who illustrated *The Complete Book of Self Sufficiency*. But John Seymour was — and is — a continuing presence. “What would Seymour do?” remains a common question in our household.

Seymour's book, well-thumbed and slightly battered, was with us in 1981 when we migrated with a growing family to WA and life on seven acres in the hills east of Perth where, for 20 years, we again raised chooks and sheep and goats and used the short growing season as best we could before summer turned the landscape gold and crinkly.

And it was with us again this year when we shifted to Tassie in search of a cooler climate and a fresh experience. For the moment, and for the first time in 30 years, we're living in a city while contemplating another move to a few acres.

But, as television's 'The Good Life' showed, you can keep the idea and the dream alive even when surrounded by the neat patterns of suburbia. Tomatoes, beans and herbs sprout in pots at the front door and, later this year, they'll be with us when we shift for what may be the last time. And



**Becky in the chook yard. Peter and Janice found that killing one of their geese was such a repulsive experience they never tried again.**

so, of course, will that book and the memory of the man we never met but who helped to re-shape our lives.

Farewell John — and thanks.

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# Home power query

by Peter Pedals

Nimbin, New South Wales.

Dear Sir/Madam,

I am writing to ask if you can help. I am at the early stage of researching equipment sources for stand-alone generation systems on New Zealand farms. Deep cycle battery storage, wind and photovoltaic generation, likely requiring generator backup, are my main concerns. Are you able to give any assistance? Will only consider long-life equipment.

Perhaps you can give details of manufacturers of this equipment. I appreciate any help you may be able to offer.  
P Bennett, Porikua, New Zealand

Dear P Bennett,

From your letter I gather that you are interested in a "hybrid" stand-alone power system. Stand-alone refers to the fact that your power system will not be connected to the power grid supplied by a power utility. The word "hybrid" in this context refers to having various energy sources combined into the same power generation system; for instance, photovoltaic (pv) solar modules, wind turbines, micro-hydro turbines and diesel generators can all be combined to charge the same battery bank and provide 240V AC through the same inverter. If the inverter is an inverter/charger and is one that can be generator interactive then it can turn the generator on automatically to either charge the batteries if the battery voltage gets down to a critical level or run in tandem with the generator to operate loads that are too big to be handled by either the inverter or generator on their own.

You also stipulate that you will only consider long-life equipment. All reputable brands of solar modules have

a warranty of 20 or 25 years. The first solar modules built for NASA more than 50 years ago are still working today. So there is no problem with that one. Regulators, inverters and battery chargers are all solid-state devices that theoretically will last a very long time, but in practice one can never be absolutely certain as to when they may develop some fault. Our experience has been that Australian-made inverters and regulators generally have a lower failure rate than Asian products. We have also found that the cheaper Asian products often have dubious ratings and so not only is it a cheaper product but it is also a lesser product. The biggest bugbear of the hybrid power system is the battery bank. It is very much limited in terms of life expectancy and will be the greatest ongoing cost in terms of periodic replacement. Some of the best quality battery banks still need replacing at least every 15 years. The longevity of the battery bank will be reduced when you work them harder and cycle them deeper. It is possible to kill the best battery bank within a year if you try hard enough.

You also ask for details of manufacturers of this equipment. There are many manufacturers all over the world, but I would hesitate to provide you with a list for you to start sourcing the equipment as the whole system needs to be a carefully-designed package to meet your expectations. For this you will need to contact a reputable system designer and provide this person with a load profile (some of which may be seasonally variable) as well as your exact location including longitude and latitude and your contact details. With this information at hand they can then design the entire system using components that will be compatible with one another and can be integrated together. I have seen many cases where systems have fallen over because the components didn't match up or where the components were sourced by an inexperienced person.

Peter Pedals, Rainbow Power Company, [www.rpc.com.au](http://www.rpc.com.au), Nimbin, NSW 2480.

## Obituary

### Joe Tamaliunas

*Earth Garden* was saddened to learn that one of our contributors, Joe Tamaliunas, died on 24 May 2005 following a recent diagnosis of a brain tumour.

The following obituary was posted on the notice board at the post office in Joe's town of Bakers Hill, Western Australia:

"Every town has its characters, love them or hate them, the world would be a dull place without them. It is our eccentricities and idiosyncrasies that keep us different and shape us into who we are. It is wise to

remember, that come hell or high water these fabulous little quirks cannot be changed nor why should they? In the end it is far easier and considerably less stressful, just to simply work around the bits that don't take our fancy. Last night Bakers Hill lost one of its characters. Love him or hate him this is a time for reflection and understanding.

NEVER ASSUME

To Joe may you finally have peace.

— Allyson Keyes"

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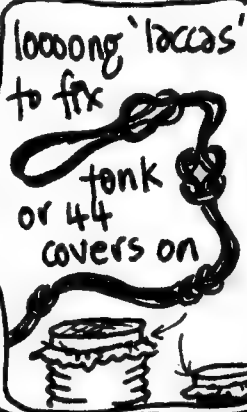
Redwood



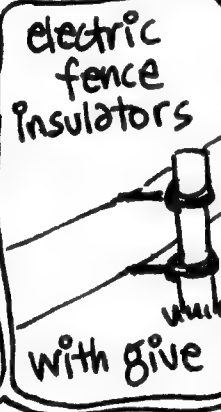
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TWANG



roll up + nail on  
SLAM!



or as axe handle protectors  
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or as axe handle protectors  
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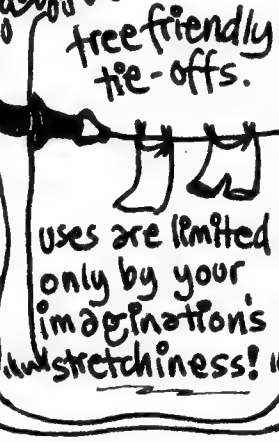
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# Season by Season

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## The excavators are at it again...

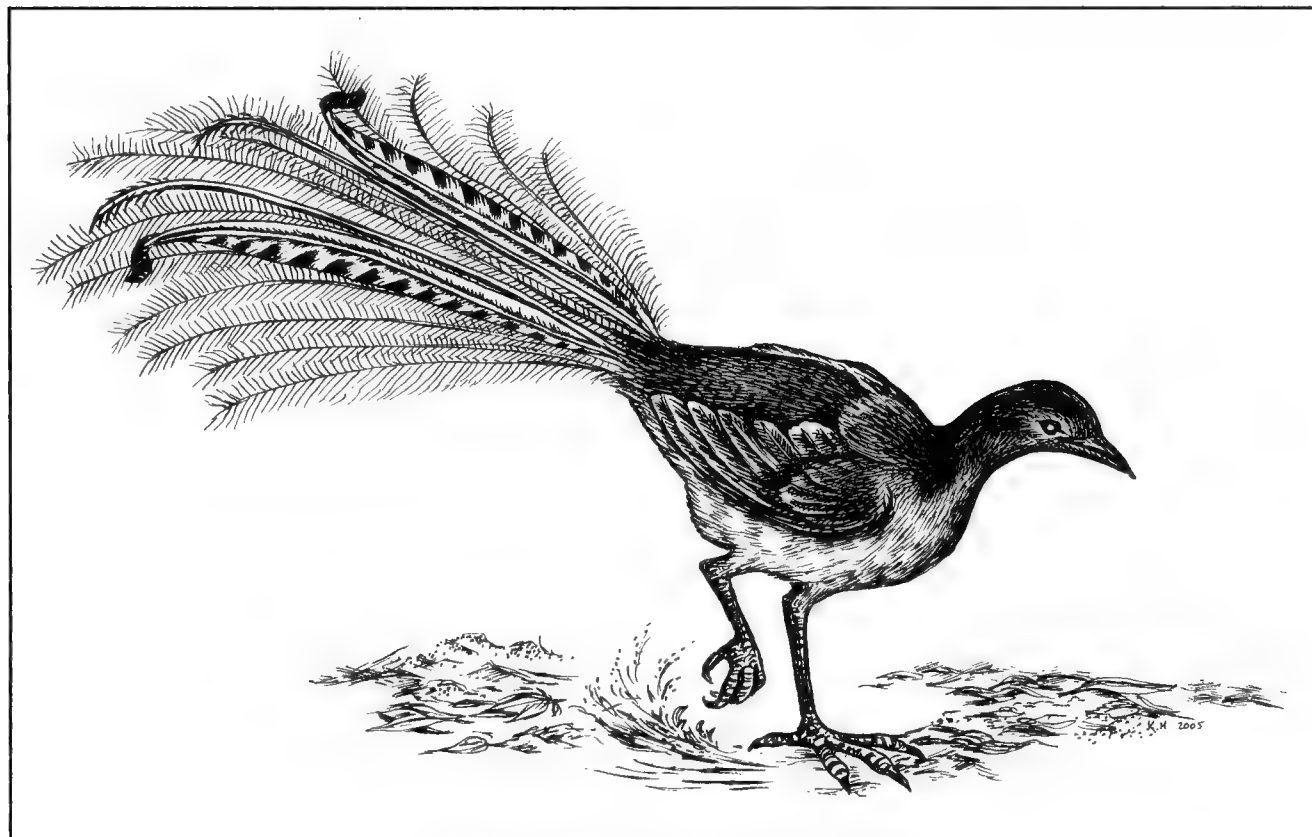
Mothball wombat started it – Mothball's the most digging wombat I've ever met, and always gets going about this time of year. Bryan had to take half a barrow load of dirt and rocks away from her hole behind the bathroom this morning. (Her other hole is under our bedroom, which explains the 2 AM earthquakes as she scratches her back on the floor joist under our bed.)

Down on the creek flat, Mothball's son Grunter is digging a new hole under our new water tank. Most wombats are lousy engineers – they renovate old holes, rather than build new ones – which is why if land is ripped

for pines and wombat holes are destroyed it may be generations before wombats move back in. But Mothball's family are persistent. Their first and second holes usually collapse, but by the time they're on their third or fourth the holes work either by luck or judgement.

It's a digging time for lyrebirds too. Lyrebird feet are great for turning over mulch so it turns into soil faster, but they're a disaster if you're trying to plant anything smaller than a metre-high tree, complete with stake. But at least all this digging lets us see what the subsoil is like. And it's interesting.

This is our fourth year of drought, though most of the



Lyrebird feet are great for turning over mulch.

last twenty years have been pretty dry too. But the soil here varies extraordinarily in dryness.

Down on the flat by the creek it's sandy and even as I write this in mid-winter the trees are wilting. Up the slope above the house the soil is dust – no real structure at all, just powder, as though this last year has been the last straw, even though it's been a bit wetter than the ones before.

But even after all this dry there are places where there's still moisture underneath – the wombats must be able to smell it out, as that's where they're digging (not even a wombat can make a hole in dust or sand).

And the damp bits are just the ones you might expect, in the groves of trees and shrubs, heavily mulched, protected by canopies of leaves, a bit like oases in a drying world.

It makes sense, when you think about it. One tree all alone is vulnerable to pests, wind, cold and heat. But a forest protects its members. Which is what a good garden is – a hand-made forest – as long as you haven't spaced your trees out so neatly that they're really just a hundred individuals, all in lines.

## Consign it to the ecology

Actually "mulch" is a bit of an overstatement. One thing droughts are rich in is weeds. One shower of drizzle and up they pop out of the bare ground. Wonderful things, weeds. So we pull them up or mow them down and pile them around the trees.

But one thing is unmistakeable: the more trees, the more soil moisture, and the easier it is to mulch the lot. (Even if a lot of that mulch is branches and uprooted young saplings from other trees.) Plant close, mulch lots and choose trees that survive drought.

## Which ones?

Actually most trees are pretty hardy, as long as (this is important) they have had time to establish good root systems before it dries up. To my surprise even our shallow-rooted mature citrus have all survived the last

four years of drought. Most of the year they're leafless, shrivelled and basically dead looking. But as soon as it rains they get new leaves.

But this only works with mature trees with good root structures. Young citrus, three to five years old, wither in the first month of hot drought – and don't come back again.

How else to keep your trees alive? Beware of drippers right above the roots – there's no reason for the roots to go exploring if the soil outside the root zone is drier than where they are. Put drippers on the uphill side, just outside the drip line – the area where rain (that strange stuff from the sky, remember it?) drips onto the soil from the outer leaves. Mulch well outside the drip line too, to encourage bigger roots.

But above all – don't panic. We've had leafless avocados for six months – one died, in a really exposed spot, but the others have all come back. Oranges have been withered for six months too, as well as lemons, japonica camellias, tamarillos and hydrangeas. It is really astonishing what looks dead but revives. You realise that trees lose their leaves as a way of surviving – less moisture lost, less moisture needed, a sort of tree hibernation. But again – they must be well established with really good roots. And don't feed stressed trees. They don't need any tucker

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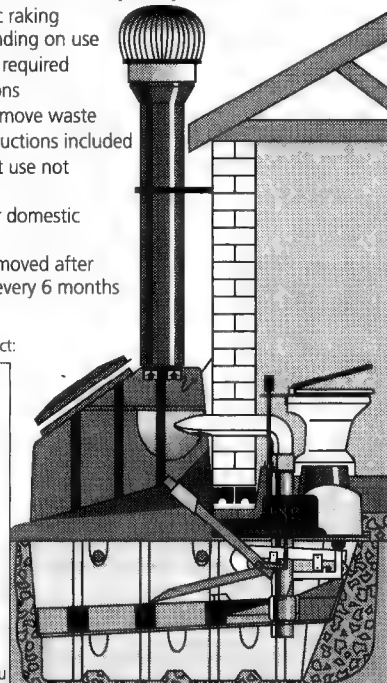
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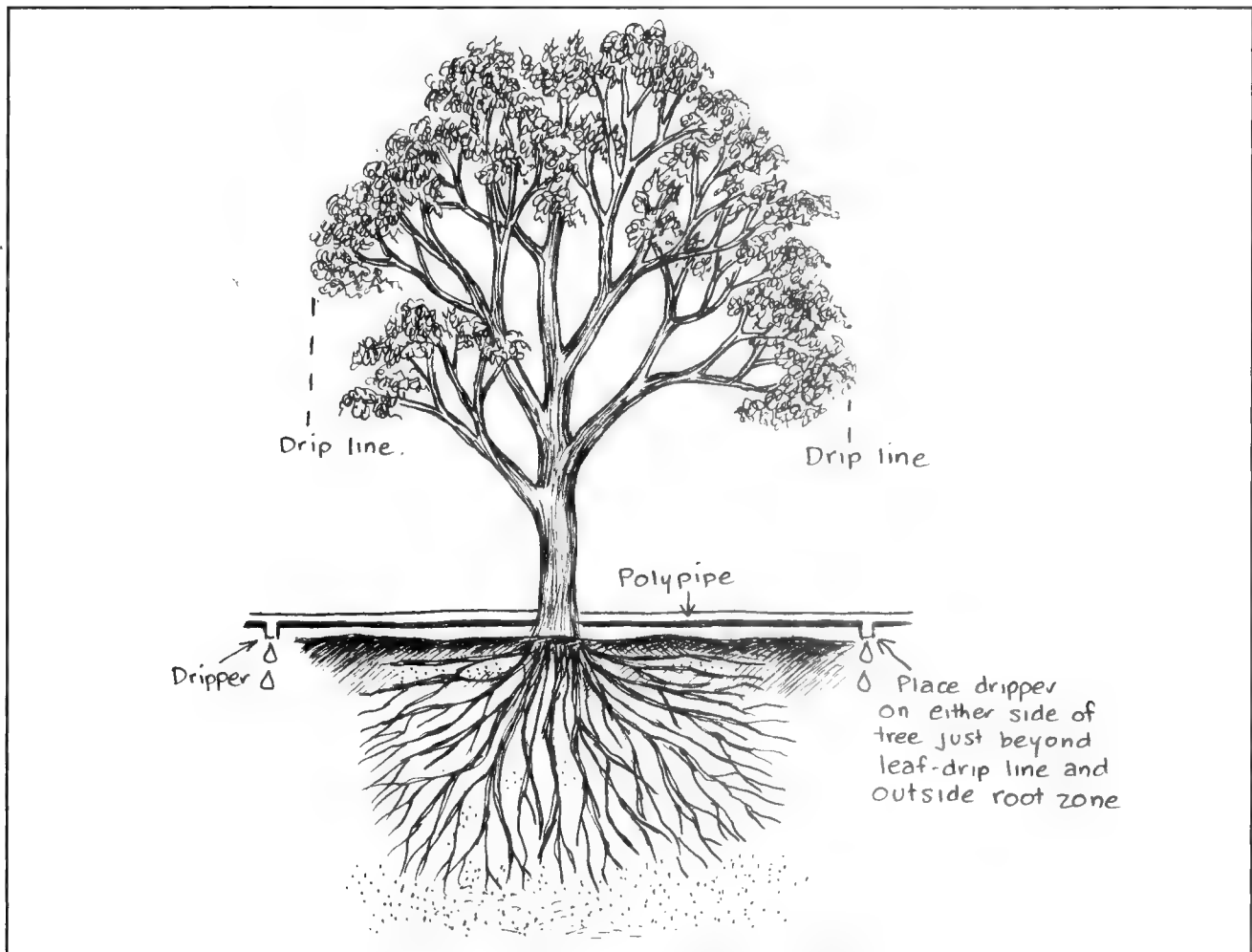
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Place any drippers just outside the dripline.

anyway – they’ve shut down for the duration. But feeding trees when the soil is dry is a good way to kill them.

## Essentials for spring

Okay, to be honest I want to grow everything, even now it’s so dry I know there is no point putting in lettuce,

even my reliable Freckles. (One day I might even get a giant greenhouse, with pool, to grow some chocolate... and, thank you, carob is not the same. One of my night time fantasies is an empty planet, waiting to be planted...)

But the emergency rations, if you like, that every garden needs in spring, are vegies. This is the time to plant



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lots. Choose varieties of carrot that won't go to seed till next spring (a good catalogue will tell you) and plant enough for the entire year. Ditto silver beet, beans for drying (home-dried beans are about 1,000% better than the bullet-like tasteless ones you can buy). Just let the pods dry on the plant. When all are brown and dead gather and store.

No-work indestructibles: chokos, burdock, chili-cayotes, rhubarb, garlic chives, Warrigal spinach – they stagger on till there's a shower of rain then whoosh, you'll be feasting.

Evergreen fruit trees: these do seem to do best if planted in early spring, just as the soil is warming. Their roots start spreading and three years later always look bigger and hardier than ones planted at other times of the year.

Save plastic milk containers. Put two tiny holes in the top and two in the bottom, fill with water and stick two next to newly planted trees. The water will slowly seep out. Fill them twice a week. It's not enough to get your trees whooshing for the sky, but it's enough to keep them alive and growing.

Harvest mulch, as much as you can – grab any weed you can catch a glimpse of and throw any prunings and garden waste under large trees where the mess won't bother you but the soil organisms can gobble them up. But don't use carpet or anything that's too dense, even grass clippings – light falls of rain won't be able to penetrate. Mix grass clippings with leaves, corn stalks, old bean plants etc. be-

fore you use them or sprinkle lightly over other mulch.

## The problem might be us

I think I was three when I first started dreaming of land of my own.

It was a good dream – trees for fruit and gum trees for leaf song and wandering animals and a cow or two, a larder like great grandma had with honey dripping into buckets and the smell of cold stone floor and fermenting jam and always enough vegies for any visitor that mooched by. (Come to think of it, grandma's stories of her mother's childhood had a lot to answer for.)

It was a good dream in another way too. I wanted to step lightly on the land, to be part of it. It was a pat yourself on the back and feel just a little bit smug sort of dream.

Thirty something years ago, when I went bush, most rural areas were still suffering from the aftermath of the sixties drought. It was a time of cheap land, rural schools and country post offices closing for lack of people, derelict farm houses and abandoned orchards.

It's different now. Five years of scrimping was enough to buy land then, even if it was mostly rock and blackberries and fallen fences. (Come to think of it, though, land isn't that much more expensive now. Our place cost about five years of one person's average wage, which would be equivalent to about \$200,000 now.)

These days having your own bit of bush is fashion-

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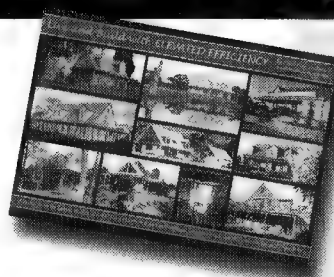
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able, instead of radical, either as a weekender (ie maybe half a dozen weekends a year) or the place to retire to in twenty years or so... and each of those dreams is wonderful in itself.

But good dreams can have bad consequences. Weekenders or land locked up for retirement plans means communities are broken up as the majority of farms are owned by absentee landlords – and even those with enough commitment to be there every weekend don't have the time or energy to be part of a living community too. How can you, when you're bushed – no pun intended – from working all week then travelling?

But there is another problem too. The bush isn't endless – and rural resources aren't endless either. Each new household needs water, roads, possibly schools and hospitals and bush fire response capability.

Around here – and I suspect in most areas these days – water is the final constraint on any development. Our area already has more people than the land can support in a bad year. But every month there are more and more plans for subdivisions, more big farms broken up into 40-hectare blocks, more largish blocks turned into two to half-hectare blocks, and more acre blocks around the towns and villages turned into small allotments.

The land can't cope. There just isn't the water. And the bush is vanishing – not the trees (in fact there are even more trees now, as grazing land turns into small blocks) – but bush is more than trees: it's birds and animals, ground covers and bushes, and they don't survive a house cow, a pony, kid's motor bikes or even bicycles, or even just too many feet too often.

Each new household has an impact too. Even with the gentlest touch possible your extra sewage, compost and mulch will change the ecology of the area. Will you spray for termites? (Sorry frogs, echidnas and insect-eating birds.) Will you have a house cow or a goat? (Sorry wombats, wallabies and the others who used to eat the grass.) Fence out neighbour's cattle? (How many animal routes will you disturb?)

Dreams are wonderful things – and the dream of the simple life, the bush around you, the fruit trees growing,

the vegies for the picking, I think is the sweetest dream of all. But it's no longer always a good dream to have... and it's leading to ecological disaster.

So what to do?

First, work out how many people, farms and domestic stock an area can support. Not in a good year, with rain and lush grass, but in the worst years (which is what the land's first human carers did – matched their population size to bad times, not good ones).

You can agitate for your local council and/or state government to do this. But you can also do this yourself. Before you buy or before you sell part of your land to others, work out: is this a good thing that I'm doing? Can the land really support more? Or am I just assuming that ecological constraints apply to others, not to me?

If you're buying, and you think an area already has enough people, don't buy a new development. Only buy land from someone who is moving away, or where the owner has died so you are part of a stable population: one person goes, another can move in.

Second, don't plan to make a profit from land. We don't own land – not morally. We just caretake it. Accept that if you decide to sell you are entitled to make more or less the average amount that all land prices have risen, so that you can buy somewhere else. A useful place to start is by considering windfall profits or speculation profits as immoral.

Sorry for the lecture here. But sometimes the very best of intentions can have bad results. And our land is exhausted – the water table is dropping and the populations of native animals are falling below levels where they can keep going for many more generations.

## How do you tell if the land is bearing up?

Water – If the sources of water for wildlife have dried up for the first time in white history – when the springs have dried up in response to a falling water table – then there are too many people.

Diversity – Ask around. What animals have vanished in the past decade? Twenty years? Thirty? (Thirty years ago we had bandicoots, bettongs, rock wallabies, pretty-faced wallabies, red-necked wallabies, rock pythons, tree frogs, dingos and quolls. None now.)

Community health – Ask at the Council or the bush fire brigade – what proportion of properties are owned by absentee landlords? If there's more than 20 per cent, the community is declining.

There are probably lots of other indicators too. But those are a good place to start.

And there are communities that do still need people. (Though you may not find many in weekend commuting distance from a city.) There are places that desperately need good carers to tend them, revegetate them, encourage wild animals and that can be a refuge from consumerism and insanity too.



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# Caring for your slow combustion stove

**Flue blocked? Smoke everywhere?  
Ash settling on all horizontal surfaces?  
Cheryl tells how to avoid these problems  
and get the best from your stove.**

**by Cheryl Rudd**  
*Wellingrove, NSW.*

**W**HETHER you have no choice about using a fuel stove, or you have chosen one because of the many benefits, here are some hints to make the job a little easier and less stressful.

## **Have a double-skinned or triple-skinned flue**

In cold temperatures when hot smoke goes up the flue carrying ash and soot, it meets the cold air and solidifies, sticking to the inside of the flue and eventually building up enough to hinder the air flow and even completely block the flue pipe. A second or third skin keeps the cold away from the soot and ash and allows it to travel up and out the top of the flue.

## **Stack fresh firewood on its end**

New firewood still has sap in it. Burning sap causes smoke and blocks flue pipes. If your firewood has been cut from a tree which has been lying down it will still have plenty of sap in it. Even if it has been up off the ground there is little chance for the sap to leach out unless it is standing. A standing dead tree will have little sap left and is perfect for firewood, but is also a perfect home for native animals. Stand cut firewood on its end out in the weather. It can be stacked up in a teepee shape and the rain will wash the sap out. Putting a sprinkler over it will speed up the process if you can afford the water. Leave it there for 12 months then stack enough under cover to keep you going for a week or two.

## **Open the firebox door carefully**

Crack the door open until the catch has just released. Leave it for a few seconds and then slowly open it all the way. This prevents a gush of smoke and ash escaping the fire when the door is pulled open in one movement.



**Baking biscuits in the wood stove.**

## **Give yourself half an hour before retiring to stack the fire**

Last thing at night, leave the flue and air supply vents fully open for at least ten minutes or until the coals are red hot. Stack wood in carefully. Never toss the firewood into the firebox. The firebricks in the stove are fragile and crack easily causing air and smoke to escape and the fire to work inefficiently. Leave the flue and air vents open for at least twenty minutes or until the new wood is blazing well. Then slowly close down both the air and the flue. The fire should glow until morning when you light it up again.

## **Keep the top bright**

Wiping the top over with a cloth and furniture polish when it is cool will make it easy to clean any spilled food from the cooking surface. Do this as soon as it is spilled. If you have a cast iron surface inside the oven, paint it with lime-wash. This will absorb fat and can be scraped off and redone when necessary.

Using a slow combustion stove is not as easy as electric or gas but when you taste the roast lamb and scones that come out of it you'll know it is worth the effort.

# THE ABC OF WWOOF HOSTING

**Have you ever considered being a WWOOF host but hesitated to take the plunge into the unknown? Here Jill discusses the rewards and pitfalls, drawing on her experience over 25 years.**

**by Jill Redwood**

*Goongerah, Victoria.*

**W**WOOF stands for Willing Workers On Organic Farms. It's a brilliant system that registers organic farm hosts and potential farm workers. In Australia, the 1,600 organic hosts describe their farm in a booklet, which the eight to ten thousand "willing workers" buy to arrange their own farm stays. The host farmers provide food and shelter in exchange for four to six hours of work each day. It's a great system for swapping ideas and skills and for cultural exchange and experiencing life on an organic farm. It's a great way to keep fit and have fun, travel, meet new friends and experience the real people and country.

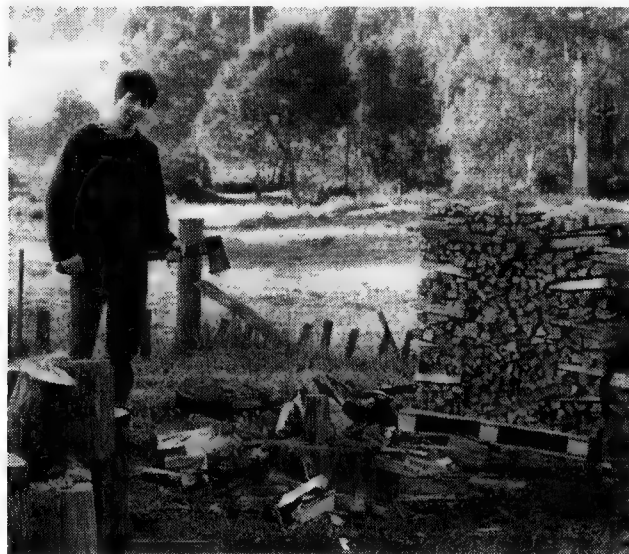
Having both WWOOFed and been a WWOOF host, I've had some fantastic people visit. In fact it was travelling English WWOOFers, Dom and Mary, who organised

for me to get over to the UK for three months WWOOFing myself in 1990.

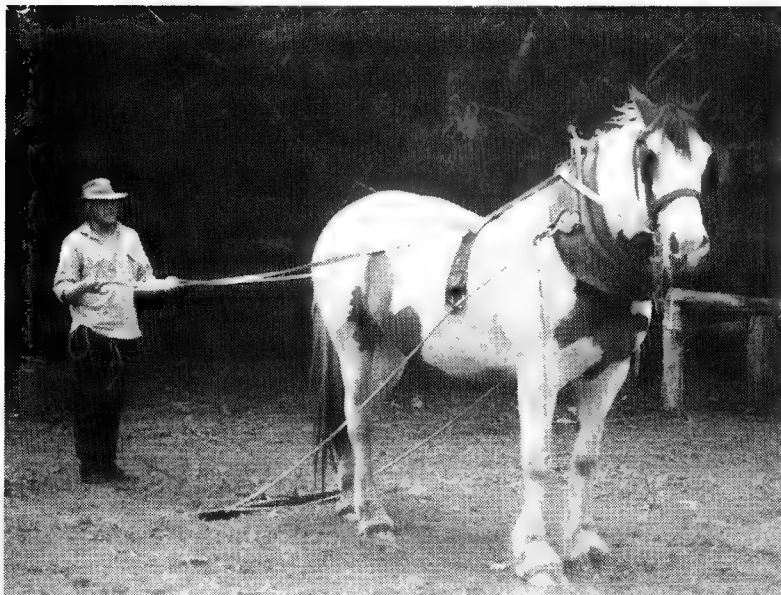
Those three months travelling around Britain were some of the most memorable experiences I've had, and I still keep in touch with several hosts. I've brought in the sheep on a New Forest pony from the marshes on the coast of Southern England; picked up horse poo on a rainswept hillside of an Irish riding academy; slept in a half-rotted caravan with gaping holes next to a manure dump; tended rare breeds on a Yorkshire Dales farm and milked goats in an old stone barn in the north of Scotland's 20-hour mid-summer days. Each farm stay gave me a taste of their small scale farming practices and the different methods of doing things. I also became familiar with the local villages and nearby woods. It was like living in something from "All Creatures Great and Small". However, I did run into a few dud hosts who were less than fair in their exchange. No doubt many hosts run into dud "willing workers" as well.

I've been a WWOOF host in East Gippsland for about 25 years now, and I'm often asked by other hosts if there's a secret to managing new-chum workers. Problems seem to arise when hosts assume new WWOOFers understand basic farm skills and etiquette. Minimising problems is mostly a matter of clear English, and sorting out what's expected right from day one.

During the initial phone contact I try to tell what type of person I'm dealing with. A WWOOFer's interests and ability to communicate are pretty important things to suss out. Asking about their previous WWOOFing experiences or their life WWOOFing can give a rough idea of the person. I've become a little discerning over the years and knock back those who don't meet basic criteria like being able to put a sentence together. A German accent gets a thumbs up immediately from me. All have been excellent helpers and house guests. Others say the same about Asian travellers. I know we shouldn't stereotype people, but Europeans and Brits are my favourite. However, if I hear an Aussie voice I ask a few more questions. The majority of my dud WWOOFers have sadly been Aussies that are



**Patrick from Germany with square wood heap.**



**Above: Nick Adams from Central Australia helping train Tundra for harness. Right: Sharon mulching the garden.**



looking for cheap accommodation on their way to hang out at Byron Bay. However, another host friend swears by the Aussies. This could either depend on the luck of the draw of the description of the farm in the book that attracts different types of people. But don't get me wrong – since my ruthless vetting system was brought in, I've met the most interesting and decent Australians as well.

The description of the host farm and the details listed in the book should be honest. Sipping wine on the verandah watching sunsets, and swimming in the river is fine if it also includes the wood chopping, rock carting or hole digging for the rest of the time. Let the potential WWOOFer know if they'll be in a leaky tin shed or have a soft bed in a room in the main house. If visitors know what to expect they won't feel duded if it's less than described.

Spell out simple considerations from the start – like what time the daily routine starts, that all tools should be put back where they came from and help is appreciated with meals and so on. I have to remind each person about the farm's foibles and the fridge door's catch. Sometimes the chook feed bin will still be left uncovered in the rain and the fridge door left ajar all night. Much patience is needed with many WWOOFers and if you don't have much, hosting WWOOFers might not be a good idea. I just have to keep reminding myself that there was a time when I also didn't know the difference between wood ash and shell grit, or that someone might not be able to use an axe. They know every techno option on the latest mobile phones, but explaining that certain resources are valuable and limited, like bottled gas, water and firewood, avoids potential problems.

Showing new WWOOFers around the main part of the farm and letting them wander around by themselves

helps them get to know the lay of the land, where the sheds are, the dunny, animals, gardens and so on.

Because there's been the odd WWOOFer abuse the trust system, the WWOOF organisers now ask that

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every worker show their ID and numbered WWOOF book to their hosts on arrival. This almost never happens for some reason. The hosts don't like to ask to see their ID as they feel like Big Brother. If you do suspect a WWOOFer, you could ask to see their book – just to check out what new neighbouring farms are listed – if you need another reason. Sometimes books are passed on from person to person, so there are times when those using the book aren't the registered owners. Not even knowing how to trace a person could present problems so it's best to check. Over the years, I've only come across a few I didn't trust, and had to ask to leave, but on the other hand, I've trusted some to look after the house and farm for a couple of weeks.

Getting WWOOFers started on a suitable task is easy. I always have a pre-organised list of work, easy stuff and slightly more skilled. After you learn what experience they've had or not had, you can tailor jobs to suit. Sometimes it's not possible to be working all together every day, but it's a good idea if you can. It avoids misunderstandings.

With some jobs, it might take twice as long to explain it than to do it yourself, and then four times longer for an inexperienced person to do the work. If a WWOOFer wants to take half a day to chop a barrow of wood when you really want them to be picking beans, suggest they practice wood chopping during their time off. You have to find a happy balance between getting serious help and allowing WWOOFers to learn things. Most farms can't afford to be hosting helpers who don't help much.

If visitors have experience with say, horses, I'll get them to help train them or let them exercise the horses. Cleaning out a chook shed, moving mulch, stacking wood or weeding are all good for the less experienced. But never have them digging weeds all day. Variety is a key to keeping workers happy. WWOOFers could also let hosts know their skills and favourite jobs, especially useful and unusual ones like, say, sharpening

tools or carpentry.

If there's not urgent work to be done, I'll walk around the farm with the jobs list and explain each task, then leave it to the WWOOFers to decide what they'd like to do. Usually that means the goose poo never gets shovelled up, but that's OK.

Anything that's semi-skilled should have careful explanation. Most problems lie in poor communications and assumptions – on both sides. I've worked out that it saves huge problems if WWOOFers simply have their intelligence insulted (apologise for it beforehand to avoid any offence) rather than assuming they have practical nous – like knowing the breaking strain of a shovel handle or that candles under curtains can cause the hut to burn down.

You have to do a day's test run first to know really how savvy each one is. I have had people not know how to light a match (true!). Safest to have every detail explained in simple language with these folk. But on simple hard yakka jobs they can be excellent.

With people who don't have English as their first language, even the word "wheelbarrow" can be an unknown, and many feel too embarrassed to ask. Encourage them to ask questions – about anything.

When I was WWOOFing on UK farms, it was an eight-hour day. But back here the expected work hours are between four and six hours, depending on the work and the board arrangements. Breakfast and lunch here are self-serve affairs, with a good supply of fresh eggs, porridge and sandwich material or leftovers. Dinner is a homemade hot meal with fresh organic food from the garden. At one WWOOF farm I stayed at, the helpers were fed a hand-sized plastic wrapped "pizza" that was 90 per cent white dough – every day – from the freezer; hardly in keeping with the organic farm theme.

A hearty breakfast and a good feed at the end of the day are essential. WWOOF cookery has become a real art over the years. I try to make it healthy, from the garden whenever possible, tasty, filling and plenty of it.

Many comments in my visitors' book rave about the cuisine, the animals and inspirational lifestyle. From my side of the deal, I get great help with farm work, a sharing of ideas, music, recipes, light-hearted chat and the thought that visiting WWOOFers have had contact with a different way of life and values system. It's nice to think their life's directions might change or at least they might carry lifelong memories of the farm, as I do of the small organic farms in Britain.

A good WWOOFer is worth their weight in gold, and I couldn't have managed on this farm without the hundreds of helpers who've been through. They've helped build sheds, train horses, crush and juice barrow loads of apples, chop two months of wood, dig huge holes, entertain with live Irish music, prune the orchard and help where one more person can make a job three times easier.



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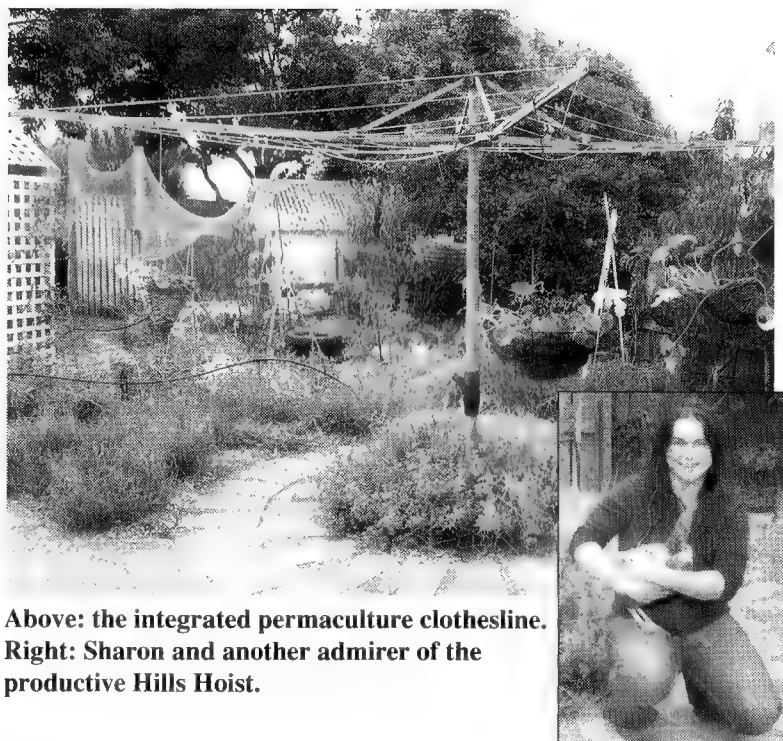
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# The Permaculture Hills Hoist

**That great Aussie icon  
has rarely featured in the  
permaculture garden.  
Sharon Rossi welcomes it  
into the fold.**

**by Sharon Rossi**  
*Warragul, Victoria.*



**Above: the integrated permaculture clothesline.  
Right: Sharon and another admirer of the  
productive Hills Hoist.**

**F**OR MANY the “Hills Hoist” rotary clothesline is a symbol of the typical suburban backyard – nice level lawn, a few plants (maybe roses, or a lemon tree if you are lucky) around the fence line and Sundays spent mowing. The Hills Hoist doesn’t seem to have a place in a typical permaculture/self-sufficient garden setting. Or does it?

Lets take one of the fundamental permaculture principles – that all components (plants and structures) should have multiple uses. Off the top of my head I can think of several uses for the Hills Hoist that fit into a permaculture/self-sufficient garden setting (and that doesn’t include a place to dry your clothes).

The area directly under the Hills Hoist (approximately 1.5 m radius from the post) is not very useful for playing ball games, for instance, so is a great place for a small garden bed. A really good example of a permaculture garden bed would include multiple-use plants. For example lemon balm smells nice (and if you brush against it when you hang out the clothes it will give off a fragrance). You can put the leaves in cool drinks in summer and hot drinks in winter; it has medicinal properties (like promoting longevity), and is rampant enough to withstand a bit of rough treatment. I also have lavender under my clothesline – for fragrance and its use in potpourri.

Other plants that may be suitable include any of the mints (although if your clothesline is in a really hot spot mint may not be too happy), which provide fragrance, and leaves for cooking and drinks. Strawberries provide fruit and some fragrance and are a good ground cover. I’m sure if you sit down and think about it there are many others. You could also wrap a short length of chicken wire around

the post of your Hills Hoist and use it as a support to grow climbing beans or peas.

The Hills Hoist is also useful as a structure to support a hanging garden. I have used the clothesline to support four hanging baskets, one on each of the horizontal arms, in which I planted peas (although you could probably use more, smaller baskets). Make sure you hang them on the outer end of the arm – not the inside – as it may cause the clothesline to fold itself up. The peas did OK, both climbing up onto the Hills Hoist and hanging down out of the basket. They did OK, that is, until the sparrows found them. You could plant all manner of smallish vegetables. (Jackie French mentions the wonders of hanging gardens in several of her books and *Earth Garden* articles.) You don’t lose a lot of hanging space by having the baskets on the clothesline; I usually hang socks near the baskets as they don’t hang down low enough to get in the way. Even if you do lose some space, a clothesline probably is only used to hang clothes on 50 or 60 days in the year (well, at my place anyway). Make it work for the other 300 odd days.

So apart from growing a decent amount of food or herbs for your family, what else is our humble Hills Hoist useful for? Well, you can string apple rings to dry on the line (wipe it first), drape blankets or sheets over it and make a cubby house for the kids, hang mirrors or sun catchers (or for the recyclers amongst us, old CDs) from the arms to make a work of art, or hang from the arms and spin around at high speed and have a bit of fun!

I hope I have proved to you that the Hills Hoist can fit into a permaculture garden, and be quite useful; it’s just a matter of using that other key permaculture principle – see solutions not problems!

# From Spade To Blade

Garden Recipes by Gary Thomas

The gardening chef deals valiantly with a surfeit of produce.



## What do you do with 13 dozen eggs and six kilograms of silver beet?

It all began yesterday. I'm looking at my perennial garden, trying to find some room within its tight spaces for a few new plants, particularly some clever varieties of tomato, when I have one of those great lateral leaps of mind. "Thirty six silver beet plants too many", I think.

I hoe in, ripping them out by the roots, big plants too some of them, destroying my carefully sculpted lines and hedges; a dedicated and remorseless human hunter; stripping the leaves from the stem, washing and drying and bagging and throwing the roots to the compost pile.

Meanwhile, a friend's daughter has her first foray into egg production with the help of 20 chickens and is overwhelmed with supply. I give her some breathing space and totter home with eight dozen googies. On my doorstep I find a gift of five dozen eggs from a local orchardist. I've hardly got room for the cartons let alone the contents. What's a cook to do?

Let's call it chard for starters, which is the name this beet has had for several hundred years. The description "Swiss Chard" dates from the 1750s.

The following is a double recipe, so you can have one today and another one tomorrow. Alternatively, pop the second one into the freezer for a rainy day. It's a fair bit of cheese, which my kids love, but you can cut back on that if you like.

### Polenta with chard and cheese

- 4 tablespoons good Italian oil
- 2 large red onions, thinly sliced
- 4 garlic cloves, minced
- 1/2 tsp dried crushed red pepper
- 1 kg Swiss chard, greens only, roughly chopped
- 8 cups water
- 2 tsp salt
- 2 cups polenta (coarse cornmeal) or yellow cornmeal
- 2 cups ricotta cheese
- 6 large eggs
- 500 g mozzarella cheese

1. Preheat oven to 350°F. Heat oil in large heavy frypan over medium heat. Add onion and cook gently until soft. Add in the garlic and the red pepper, mix through then add the silver

beet. Cover and cook until the chard is tender, about six or seven minutes probably, stirring occasionally. Take off lid and steam away excess liquid. Season and set aside.

2. Meanwhile, bring eight cups water and salt to boil in a large pot. Gradually stir polenta into boiling water. Be careful of splatters: they are hot and they really stick to soft skin. Reduce heat to medium-low; simmer until polenta is very thick, stirring frequently, about 10 minutes. Remove from heat.

3. Whisk ricotta and eggs in a bowl; whisk in two cups hot polenta. Stir ricotta mixture into polenta in saucepan. Divide half of the polenta mixture into two lightly oiled baking dishes (you can line them with baking paper if you wish). Spread half of chard mixture over. Sprinkle with half of mozzarella. Repeat layering with remaining polenta, chard, and cheese.

4. Bake until puffed and brown on top, about 45 minutes. Cool for at least ten minutes before cutting and serving. This goes well with a little side dish of some sautéed spring mushrooms.

The stalks and large white ribs are not used in this recipe nor in the next one. I often chop these up into bite-sized pieces, blanch and refresh them along with red pepper, carrot, broccoli and the like then pickle them all together as a piquant addition to early summer salads.

### Ravioli

Describing pasta preparation takes more words than the few we have here. Suffice to say, 10 eggs mixes into a kilo of flour just about right and wilted, chopped chard makes a good ravioli filling. A nice butter sauce is made from 180 grams of butter melted in a saucepan to which a quarter cup of fresh chopped sage leaves has been added. Keep hot but not bubbling for a few minutes then toss through the freshly poached ravioli and some freshly grated parmesan.

### Zesty beet

- 60 g mild lime pickle
- 3 tbsp fresh lemon juice
- 2 tbsp good olive oil
- 1 tbsp salt
- 1 kg Swiss chard, greens only, washed
- 1 tbsp unsalted butter
- a few minced spring onions
- 1 tsp lemon zest

## Sensitive new-age gardening



1. In a blender, combine lime pickle, lemon juice, and oil and puree until smooth, adding a little water if necessary to keep it runny. Set aside.
2. In a large heavy pot with a lid, wilt the chard over low to medium heat for six to eight minutes, turning occasionally. The water clinging to the washed leaves should be enough to cook without charring.
3. Heat butter in a large sauté pan on medium heat. When butter is melted, add the spring onions, sprinkle with a pinch of salt and pepper, cover, reduce heat to low and cook until the onion is soft. Remove from heat. Add chard, lime pickle puree, lemon zest, and salt and pepper to taste. Mix vigorously. Serve warm with a large wedge of potato frittata.

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tagine. Tagine is simply a Moroccan word meaning stew. The tagine can also refer to the heavy ceramic cooking pot and lid used to slowly braise the ingredients. A camp oven works really well and a bed of good coals is a very traditional addition.

- 1 kg chopped stalks and leaves of Swiss chard
- 1 cup chopped onion
- 1/2 cup chopped fresh coriander
- 1/2 cup vegetable oil
- 1 tsp. sweet paprika
- salt
- black pepper
- 180 ml water
- 1/2 cup uncooked rice

1. Use a casserole or heavy pot with a tightly fitting lid. In this pot, place chard, onion, coriander, oil, paprika, salt, pepper, and water. Bring to the boil and simmer gently for about thirty minutes.
2. Add rice. Stir well through and cook another 20 minutes until all liquid is gone. The dish is properly finished when a slick of oil coats the top of the stew. It is a wet dish commonly served with lentils.

So, what do you do with nine dozen eggs and two and a half kilos of silver beet?

Cheers, Gary Thomas.

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# Uncommon Fruits & Vegies

EG founder Keith Smith continues his regular survey of the the history and cultivation of varieties you may not find at your supermarket.

by Keith Smith

Artarmon, New South Wales.

## Plums for prunes

Deciduous plum trees and their relatives burst into blossom each spring and in summer bear ripe, juicy fruit, ready to stew for compotes and to make pies, tarts, preserves, jams and jellies.

Farmers found that these smooth, fleshy fruits dried easily for storing over winter, resulting in the familiar purplish-black wrinkled prunes.

The cultivated European plum (*Prunus domestica*) started its evolution a long time ago, somewhere about Central Asia. Botanists consider that this fruit was the result of a natural cross between the sloe or blackthorn (*P spinosa*), which has greenish flesh and bluish skin, and the genetically distinct cherry plum (*P cerasifera*), with its yellow flesh and reddish skin.

Similar unlikely unions created lesser-known relatives of plums, including bullaces, damsons and greengages. Then there are *Prunus* sub-species and an amazing number of plum varieties. Separate families of plums developed in China (*P salicina*) and in North America (*P americana*), where settlers found that native Americans gathered and dried wild plums growing from Canada to Mexico.

European plums were known to the ancient Persians, Syrians, Egyptians, Greeks and Romans. Pliny the Elder (79 AD) said that in his time a great many varieties were known. Several kinds of plums were brought from Italy to Britain during the reign of King Henry VIII.

Their high pectin content makes plums ideal for jam making.

**Bullaces** (*P insititia*) were cultivated sour plums brought from France to England during the Middle Ages, which survive in British hedges and old gardens. Fruits are used to make wine.

**Damsons** The blue-purple Damascene Plum, as the damson was first called, originated in Damascus, Syria, and was taken from there to Italy about 114 BC. Damson pits were found on the sites of early Swiss lake dwellings. Their taste is tart and spicy, ideal for jam and fruit butter. These grape-sized fruits are self-fertile.

**Greengages or gages** were named after Sir William Gage,

who received plants from his brother in France in 1720 and grew them at Hengrave Hall, Suffolk.

However, gages originated in Greece and had already been introduced to England from France in the fifteenth century as “Reine Claude”, named after Queen Claude, wife of King François I. Small, round, green-yellow plums are juicy and delicious and good for bottling.

**Sloe or blackthorn** (*P spinosa*) A possible ancestor of domestic plums and greengages, this is a small, thorny blossom bush or tree indigenous to Europe yielding astringent small dark fruit the size of berries in summer. They are famous for making sloe gin. Shoots were cut to make walking sticks and knotty shillelaghs in Ireland.

**Prunes** are small European plums that have been dried and stored for winter use. They must have a high sugar content, firm flesh, thick skin and a small stone that will dry without fermenting. In the past, fruits were oven-dried, but today they are usually dried in the sun after being left on the tree until quite ripe. Or, split the fruit, remove the stones and expose the cut side to the sun. Prunes were introduced into Hungary from Turkestan about 1500.

Plums grown for prunes thrive in the Balkan countries, where they are made into a thick jam called *povodil*. In Morocco we learned that prunes are brilliant in lamb tajines and couscous, or with pork. Plums are also preserved in sugar, alcohol, or both.

## Growing

European plum varieties suitable for drying for prunes will grow throughout Australia in inland areas with cool winters. They bear some fruit on short spurs, but mainly on long, thin (and brittle) laterals which are best pruned to an open vase shape in the early years.

Plum trees thrive and live longer when planted in heavy soil with good drainage than in light sandy soil. They appreciate lime, but too much, over pH8, will induce chlorosis. Orchardists say there are good and bad plum and greengage years – plums tend to crop heavily one year and not very much the next.

Damsons, sloes and “Victoria” plums are self-fertile, but all others require cross-pollination, so you should plant two or more varieties.

Obtain seedlings grafted onto a reliable stock such



as the traditional cherry plum, the “Mirabelle”, or “St Julien A”, a semi-dwarf rootstock used for espalier trees.

Space large standards six metres apart, half standards about one metre less and bush plums about 4.5 metres apart, leaving about six metres between fan-trained espaliers. Stake to support low, heavily laden branches, or they will break off. Fruit tends to crack and decay in heavy rainfall areas.

### Some problems and (partial) solutions

- Despite their need for a chilling period, European plum blossoms and tiny fruits are easily damaged in spring by frost and a crop might be lost to a killing frost. Avoid planting in frost pockets and windy places, or protect trees with a windbreak.
- Brown rot fungus strikes in wet weather just as fruit is almost ripe, making them mushy and unfit to eat. To guard against this, pick up all fallen fruit.
- Trees are subject to silver leaf. Protect by propping up fruit-laden branches because disease spores enter through broken branches.

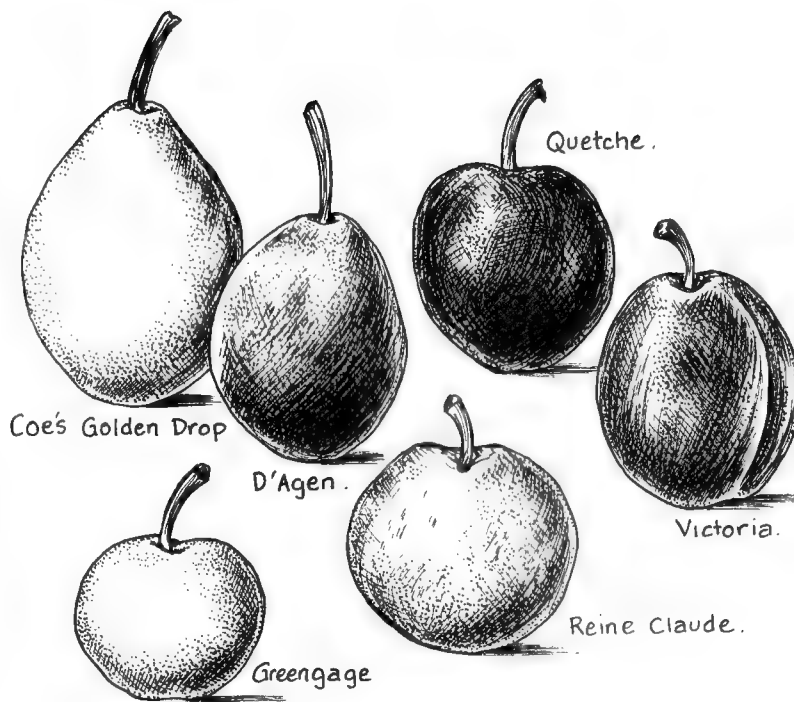
### Varieties

“Coe’s Golden Drop” (“Golden Gage”). Bears large, sweet, lemon-gold plums with sugary, crisp deep yellow flesh. An old English variety first raised by Jervaise Coe at Bury St Edmonds, Suffolk, it was a cross between greengage and “White Magnum Bonum”. It requires a pollinator and is a good pollinator for greengages. Small round fruit make good prunes.

“Giant Prune”. Vigorous trees, good bearer, with large, long, oval, dark red fruit.

“Mirabelle” is a French variety, sometimes called “Myrobelle” or cherry plum. Small, round, golden fruit make delicious preserves.

“Pruneaux d’Agen” (“d’Argen”; “Burgundy Prune”).



The classic French prune, said to have been brought to Europe from the Middle East by monks returning from the Crusades. Red-purple skin and yellow fleshed fruit is good for eating fresh, cooked or made into jam, but dries well for prunes.

“Quetsch”, a purple type from Alsace-Lorraine, was used for preserves, liqueurs and confections. It became the preferred drying plum in Germany, prepared by slow and repeated oven drying to sell in grocery shops.

“Reine Claude Violette” (“Purple Gage”). “The richest purple plum in cultivation,” according to JC Loudon in *The Suburban Horticulturist* (1845). Roundish purple fruit with sugary flesh, excellent for drying.

“Victoria” (“Alderton”; “Dauphine”; “Sharp’s Emperor”). An old English plum found as a seedling in Alderton, Sussex, in 1831 by a nurseryman named Myatt. A self-fertile, compact tree and a sure cropper, ideal if you only have room for one tree. Red-pink or purplish fruits are good cookers.

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# CONVINCING CLAY

## — PART TWO —

Every house benefits from having the walls rendered with clay, according to Frank and Ingrid, who have many years of experience as natural home builders. In the second of this major three-part series the couple discuss the characteristics of clays and tests for determining the structure of your soil.

by Frank Thomas and Ingrid Leusch

*St Georges Basin, New South Wales.*

### What is clay?

The scientific name for earth used as a building material is loam, which basically means soil with a significant clay content. However, to avoid confusion, we will continue to use the term clay throughout this article.

There are many different types of clay, ranging from kaolinities – the least expansive and binding, to bentonites – the very expansive and sticky materials; most soils contain a mixture of clays. All clays are composed of secondary or water-containing minerals of extremely fine and flat particles, sized smaller than 2  $\mu$  (micromillimetres). They are produced by the action of weathering agents (water, air and sunlight) on the feldspars and micas of igneous rocks (rocks of volcanic origin). Clay materials are composed of alumina,

silica and water with minor amounts of lime, magnesia, soda or potash. Iron compounds, hydroxides or carbonates are nearly always present as impurities in clays and account for most of the wide range of colours (*Technical Notes on Clay Bricks*, Brick Development Research Institute, Melbourne, 1977). More important than the chemical composition, however, is the fact that when mixed with water, the clay minerals give a plastic mass which can be shaped and has binding power. This binding power is based on the electrical force of attraction between the flat sides of individual clay crystals. The German norms from 1956, DIN 18954, specify bonding strengths of clay in grams per cm (g/cm). The following figures are taken from these norms indicating the binding powers of different clays:

- Lean clay 50–110 g/cm
- Slightly lean clay 111–200 g/cm
- Fatty clay 201–280 g/cm
- Very fatty clay 281–360 g/cm

They further state that clay with a binding power of less than 50 g/cm is not suitable for building purposes.

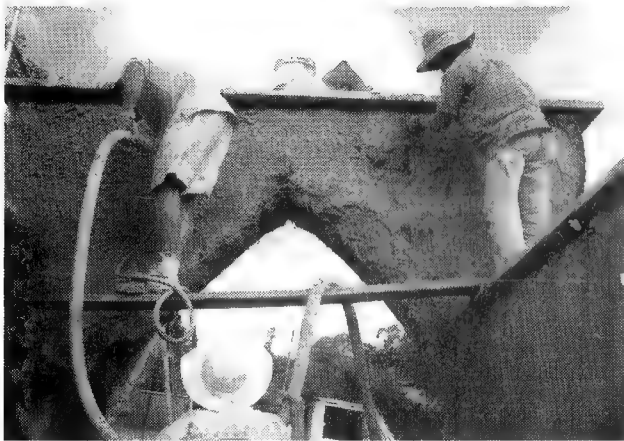
In contrast to fired clay, water can be absorbed and move freely between the flat particles of raw clay. The wet particles slide over each other, giving natural clay its extraordinary soapy or plastic consistency; the clay will harden again if dried out. This rather simple occurrence of softening and hardening shows that clay building materials must be protected from water on the one hand but on the other hand it demonstrates that clay is a very flexible material. It can be recycled, easily repaired and shaped and used in limitless forms and applications.

Before using a particular soil for construction one has to be aware of its properties. These fall into four main categories:

- Texture: describes grain or particle size distribution
- Plasticity: describes the ease of shaping



Living room at Katoomba: a fine rendered finish.



**A pointed arch goes up at Ryde TAFE.**

the soil

- **Compressibility:** describes a soil's potential to decrease its porosity to a minimum
- **Cohesion:** describes the ability of soil particles to remain in association

The following examples show different soils according to texture:

- **Gravel:** grain size distribution 2–20 mm, gravel and pebbles predominate
- **Sand:** grain size distribution 0.06–2 mm, sand predominates, has the appearance of mortar

- **Silt:** grain size distribution 0.002 ( $2\mu$ )–0.06 mm, silt predominates in a fine silky soil with low cohesion
- **Clay:** grain size distribution smaller than 0.002 mm or  $2\mu$ , clay predominates, cohesive and pliable

Depending on the quantities of a specific grain size within the soil, characteristics of the soil can be defined. For example, if the soil contains 10 per cent of clay it will have some degree of the cohesive and plastic properties characteristic of clay, whereas 20 to 50 per cent of clay particles give a soil the properties suitable for rendering: it will be extremely cohesive and malleable when wet. Soil for mudbricks or earthbuilding usually has a clay content of 5 to 15 per cent.

There are some simple visual and manual tests which can be performed quickly and easily without specialised equipment. These tests will give some indication of the composition of the soil and its suitability for a specific purpose. However, they are not very precise and more involved tests may be necessary, especially if experience with soil identification is limited. It is also highly recommended to always work with sample patches (blocks, walls) before rendering or building with clay in order to determine the suitability and performance of the soil and the needed ratio of other ingredients such as sand and water.

### **Sedimentation test**

One of the basic tests is a sedimentation test which is frequently described in earth building literature but has

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proved to be very imprecise with error rates up to 1750 percent (G. Minke, 2000, p.22). However, in this test the soil sample is mixed in a jar with water. The coarse particles settle first on the bottom of the jar whereas the finest particles form the top layer. The different layers can be visually distinguished and proportions of gravel, sand, silt and clay can be roughly estimated. If the contents of the jar are frozen, the visually distinguishable layers separated, thawed, dried and then weighed, the percentage of different composites can be expressed in mass. This refined test is much more accurate than the simple sedimentation test. However, experiments at the University of Kassel still confirm an error quotient of up to 850 percent (G. Minke, 1997, pp. 33-35).

## Shrinkage test

Clay swells when in contact with water (absorption of air humidity does not lead to swelling) and shrinks when drying out. This characteristic is rather detrimental when building with clay. However, testing clay for shrinkage cracks can give an indication of it being a fat or a lean clay. If, after drying out, a clay sample batch displays large cracks it can be concluded that is a strong or fat material. A silty clay will usually display fine cracks after drying out and clay with a high sand content may have no cracks at all. It may be best to start working with a fat clay which can be made leaner until it is perfect for its intended use by adding sand. The change of grain distribution achieved by adding sand to clay is aimed at minimising shrinkage cracks.

Other basic tests include:

1. Chewing a small sample of soil. If a grinding sensation is felt the soil has a high sand content while a soft, squashy and sticky sensation indicates a soil high in clay.
2. A sign of gravel or sandy soil is given if when rubbing a wet soil sample between the hands grains can be clearly felt. If the moist soil sample sticks on the hands but can be rubbed off when dry a silty soil can be identified. A clayey soil is very sticky making it necessary to use water to clean the hands.
3. Cut through a dense ball, formed from moist soil, with a knife. If the cut surface is shiny the soil has a high clay content while a dull surface indicates a high amount of silt in the soil.



Render can enhance the plastic shapes of the strawbale wall.

4. Last, form a ball of about four centimetres in diameter from soil just wet enough to be malleable and drop it from a height of 1.5 metres onto a flat surface. If the ball crumbles and falls apart the soil is very sandy and probably unsuitable for building or rendering. If the ball flattens only slightly and shows no cracks the soil has a high clay content and may have to be made leaner by adding sand before using it in construction.

More precise tests performed in a laboratory or by an experienced person should be sought if uncertainty of the clay's suitability for building or rendering persists.

For more information contact Frank and Ingrid at Yesterday-Today-Tomorrow Strawbale Constructions, 16 Fisherman Road, St. Georges Basin, NSW 2540. Phone (02) 4443 5282, mobile 0408 415 806, email [strawbales@bigpond.com](mailto:strawbales@bigpond.com) or web [www.strawtec.com.au](http://www.strawtec.com.au).

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Morning break for  
wwoofers at the  
Northey Street  
City Farm, Brisbane.

## A farm in the city

**Colin continues his tour of wwoofing hosts and comes across a clock run purely on the power of an organic apple.**

**by Colin Statham**

*Tweed Heads, New South Wales.*

**M**ASSES of people, vehicles, crowded streets, and noise. This is not unusual for a big city, but when I need a quiet place to do a spot of gardening, I can always find one somewhere.

At present I'm in the Moreton Bay area of Queensland for the winter, a place that has lots to offer: deserted islands, dolphins and dugongs (sh!), but living on a yacht has limited my space for my vegie growing. And having a green thumb, there are times when I need to be in a bigger garden, growing things. I then look through the WWOOF host book to see if there's a local farm I can visit, and find one, so close, right in Brisbane.

Northey Street City Farm of three hectares is a non-profit community organisation, situated on the banks of Breakfast Creek, Windsor, where shady trees, birds, and a rare bit of quietness can be found. I went, I liked, I joined, all under 45 minutes from my base.

The farm is a venue for individuals, school children, disadvantaged persons, the unemployed, and the intellectually handicapped. All can learn about permaculture and

organic gardening principles.

NSCF serves as a model from which people can learn to grow their own food without the use of chemicals, recycle most of their rubbish, and live in a sustainable way in the city.

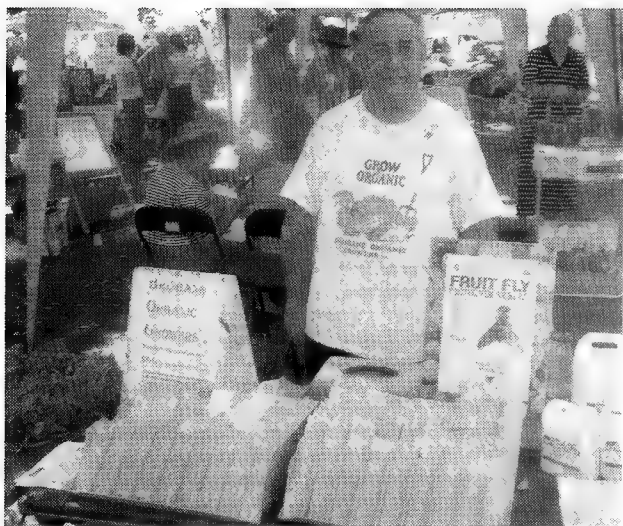
Here was a quiet, creative place to get some dirt under the fingernails, enjoy the social activity with like-minded people, whilst enjoying what I like doing. Growing things.

This local farm is another of my places of keeping in touch with the earth. NSCF has a commitment to permaculture philosophy, and organic gardening, where people from all walks of life come to explore nature's full cycle of food production from the soil to the salad...and back again.

The farm, open to the streets on all sides, has had no thieving or vandalism. It has a large car park under trees where markets are held every Saturday from 6 am to 11 am. All grades of organic vegetables and fruit are sold. Oh! And it has a delightful vegie garden.

Recycling and waste management methods are used, from compost tumblers to worm farms, to convert green waste and food scraps into potting mixes, soil conditioners and liquid fertilisers that enrich the soil, and benefit the environment.

Many people recognise that we rely on the environ-



**No chance for fruit flies: the Saturday morning market.**

ment for food essential for human survival. However, farm members know of their significant interdependence with the earth. It is because of this belief that the farm aims to help others in the community to learn and understand how to work with nature – not against it.

What is obvious here is the total approach to gardening and the growing of food: the seed bank, the nursery, soil making, potting-up shed, worms, planting, mulching, watering, picking, marketing, distribution, and the great community spirit.

There is an administration block, a notice board where all kinds of courses are posted, from permaculture, alternative healing, to starting up your own community garden, in an area set aside under the nearby trees.

There's an open kitchen with cob oven and shady seating, and a nursery, open to the public for the purchase of plants and accessories. There are chooks, a worm farm and a soil-sieving machine, driven by human power.

An information system is available for any problems that are encountered. Natural deterrents for grubs and diseases are used; even the fruit fly hasn't a chance, as the vegie garden runs as nature intended.

Volunteers can learn about composting, worm farming, no-dig gardening, and preventing pests and diseases naturally and cost-effectively without using chemicals. Then they can have morning tea and lunch provided from the very productive organic garden.

NSCF features a green waste recycling centre and an edible landscape. It is a lush oasis in the city that is surrounded by a native bush food forest, exotic fruiting trees, a cabinet timber wood lot, native revegetation, a riverine rainforest, and a walking trail.

It also features rotational gardening, with creative designs and frog ponds. Many beneficial insects and birds coexist in the farm's own little ecosystem.

Some jobs that I've been involved with are the cleaning of the plant pots, and the plant name tags for these new seedlings. The pots and tags are dumped into a large old kitchen sink set at a comfortable working height and scrubbed with recycled dishwashing brushes.

The tags are recycled from discarded venetian blind slats. They are cut to length and written on with the appropriate names. The pots are later filled with compost and set up with new plants to be sold in the nursery.

The compost making is a great way to get fit by shovelling the cured compost into the human-powered sieving machine, and removing any bits of waste twigs, plastic or silver paper. The soil when ready drops underneath into a waiting wheelbarrow, ready to be taken to the nursery.

I went in one Saturday especially for the organic vegetable market. The 50-plus stalls were either organically certified or in conversion, with posters at all stalls indicating at what level the stall is at.

The quality of produce is never in doubt. I was asked to do the taste test; no cardboard substitute vegetables here! Organic growers come from near and far for the 6 am start in the car park within the farm complex. Everything is sold out before the 11 am finish.

NSCF has a brochure claiming that it has the freshest and purest certified organic fruit, vegetables, breads, meat, dairy, dry goods and preserves at Queensland's first and only market selling certified organic produce.

One interesting lady I saw was after one organic

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apple, for her clock! On hearing this my attention was captured, and I took more notice. It was indeed a small clock run only by the power of an organic apple.

No, I hadn't been drinking. It was only the organic apple that did the trick, excuse the pun, as I keep an open mind on all things magical, as I also do some tricks. (One is to get a person to cut a length of string, and I join the two ends together with my teeth. No joins are visible. But it is only a trick.)

With her permission, I scrutinised the apple, taking it out of its little casing, turning it over. There was nowhere for even the smallest battery to be hidden.

There were only two small wires from the clock that had metal probes leading into the apple, she explained it was no trick just the power of organic fruit.

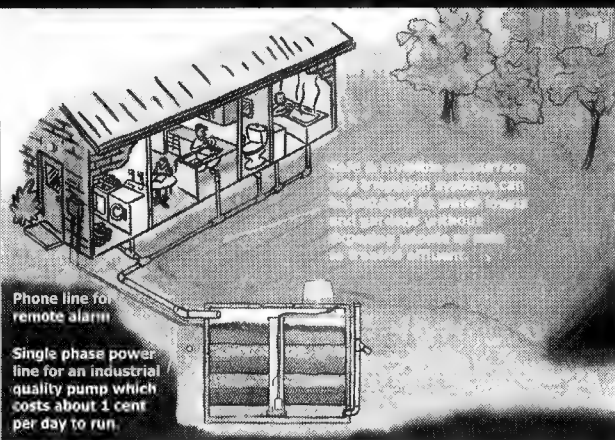
Naturally, I took photos, and later I talked to the owner of the stall who said "It's no trick. She comes in regularly for her vegies and fruit, and one extra apple." I'll keep an open mind on this one. There is a lot of energy in organic produce. I'll grow some huge cow pumpkins and see if they'll run my car.



So much variety at the NSCF nursery.

• Wwoofing is a cheap and cheerful way to see Australia. Many people also use it to try an area or way of life before plunging in. Whether as a wwoofer or a host, give it a go. Contact: WWOOF Australia, W Tree, Buchan, Victoria, 3885, phone (03) 5155 0218.

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# A homemade horse rug

Here's how to keep your horse warm and comfortable during cold weather with an inexpensive rug.

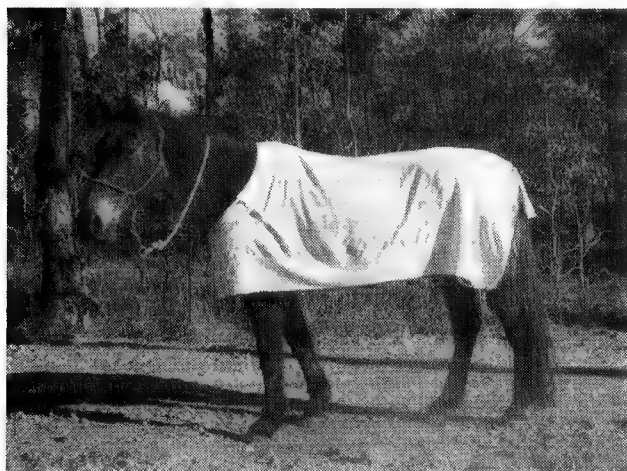
by **Sonja Ronning**

*Bundaberg North, Queensland.*

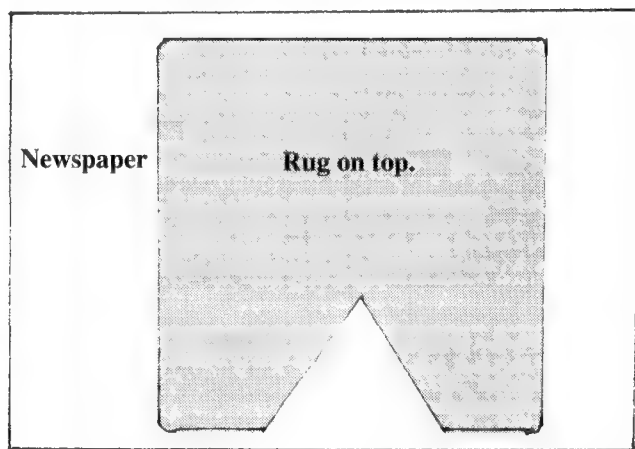
**A** HOMEMADE horse rug is cheap, easy to make and only requires a domestic sewing machine and a few basic materials.

1. First of all, you need a rug to make a pattern out of. If you already have a rug you can cut your pattern out of that. Otherwise, I'm sure another horsey person will lend you a rug (the correct size, of course) to make the pattern.
2. Choose a fabric suited to the use. This is a good time to use leftover fabric or even old sheets. For a day rug to keep the biting insects off, light, airy cotton is preferable. A rain sheet would require a canvas, and can be sprayed afterwards with water proofing for added protection.
3. Now, sticky tape some sheets of newspaper together, to make one large sheet of paper, bigger than the rug.
4. Place the rug on top of the newspapers and cut around it. Mark where all the straps are attached and do up. Now you have your pattern.
5. Place the pattern on top of the fabric and cut out.
6. Straight stitch bias binding all the way around the outside edge. This prevents fraying and stretching.
7. Stitch a piece of hemmed fabric to the inside at the chest section on both sides, and then make two slits where the rug does up across the chest. Zigzag stitch around these slits to prevent fraying. An old belt is perfect to do the front up.
8. Leg straps can be made of anything that will be kind to the legs. Leftover fabric doubled over a few times and straight-stitched into a kind of rope is perfect. Stitch clips to one end of the straps just by doubling over the fabric. When stitching legs straps on, reinforce them with a patch of hemmed fabric over the top of the stitching, on the inside of the rug. This helps prevent tearing.
9. Stitch loops to the rear end of the rug for the leg straps to clip onto. Any kind of strong baling twine doubled over, bias binding will do. Elastic is very good. The elastic is strong and will give, thus the straps are kinder to the legs.
10. A tail flap is easily attached. Cut a square of scrap fabric and straight stitch bias binding around three sides. Then stitch the side that has no binding to the rear of the rug. Place it so the binding on the rug overlaps the flap.
11. If you wish to line the rug, all you need is an old blanket. It can be easily bought from a charity shop or can come from the back of the linen cupboard. Cut your blanket to size, then straight stitch the front and back sections.

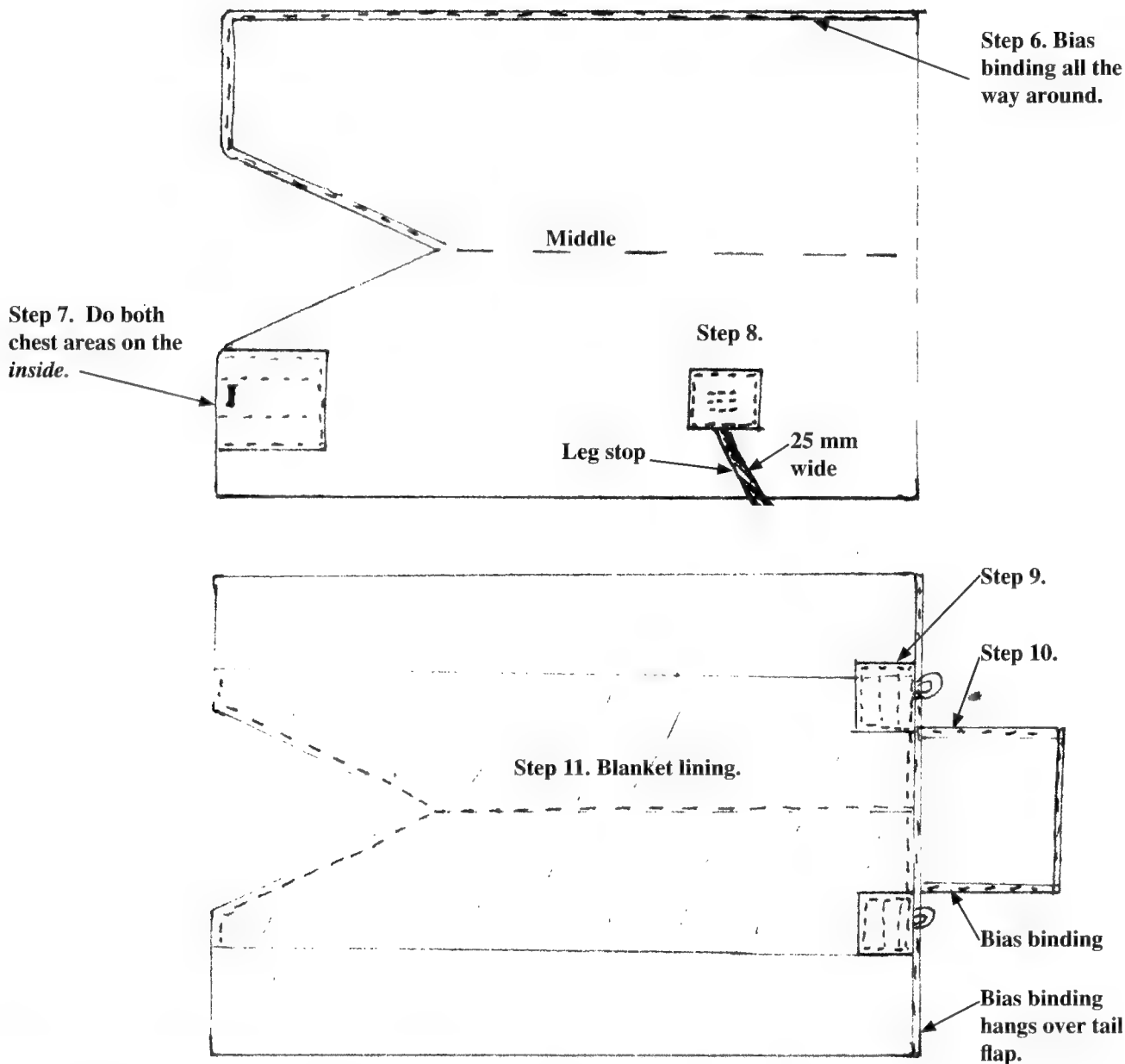
These rugs may not look as stylish as some of the bought rugs, but they do the job and only cost a fraction of the price. But best of all, you can make them any colour your horse prefers.



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# Questions & Answers

with Jackie French



If you have a problem with anything from bush flies to bananas, email Jackie at [info@earthgarden.com.au](mailto:info@earthgarden.com.au).

## Recycling dos and don'ts

Hi,

I have a couple of Jackie's books. I recently moved to a 75-acre property and am itching to experiment with Jackie's ideas for gardening and self-sufficiency. My question is about household waste and re-use. We don't have garbage removal here and because I'm too lazy to drive to the tip all the time I'd like to recycle as much as possible via compost and whatnot. I know that some things aren't suitable for composting – meat, fish, chicken. Chooks eat meat scraps. Do they eat leftover chicken? What about oils? And what about tin cans? I heard somewhere that you can bury tin cans and the elements will be returned to the soil. Is that true? I'd love to hear your ideas on such things. Thanks! April.

Hi April,

Chooks love meat. You should see them discover a nest of baby rats. Carnage! Ruthless beasts, chooks. So cooked meat can be given to them, in small amounts so that it doesn't go off before they eat it. Best give them meat scraps though in a feeder that can be cleaned, otherwise you may introduce salmonella into your chook yard and onto your eggs.

Oils are fine for chooks, again in moderation and as long as they're not rancid. I find the easiest way is to add it to a mash or soak bread in it.

The trouble with tin cans is that they're often not tin, but aluminium. Tin and aluminium will eventually break down or oxidise, but we may be talking centuries here. The best way to get rid of cans is not to buy them! (Says she who has a passion lately for those big, white, canned Italian beans, to be eaten with garlic and lemon juice, chopped parsley and red onion and a drizzle of olive oil. But I do feel guilty every time I open a can instead of cooking a giant batch of our own.)

If you restrict the number of cans you buy and wash them well before squashing them they can be stored quite neatly and efficiently until you can take them to a recycling centre. They are light and it should take you several months to collect a box full of them if you are careful in your buying habits.

The real trick for many people is to avoid buying tinned pet food. If your domestic pets rely on tinned food

for the bulk of their diet you will very quickly have way too many cans to deal with and they are quite repulsive to clean so the pile is often distinctly unpleasant and smelly. Your pets, and the environment, will thank you when you make the switch and feed them dry food with maybe a bit of home-made meat, rice and veg based food as a treat.

We inherited a 100-year farm family rubbish dump when we bought this place – which has been fascinating – but luckily their rubbish was more the bottles, cracked china, old boot variety, not electrical goods, batteries etc which can leach out toxins.

As a rule of thumb, stuff which has been grown can be recycled on your place; any industrial rubbish needs to go back to industrial world to be recycled or disposed of. All the best, Jackie.

PS Our greatest problem is paper – not newspaper, as we only get one a week and read the paper on the net the rest of the time and listen to the radio. But we do get boxes of mail to answer every week and press releases etc – far too much to recycle unless we had a commercial-sized worm farm ... and I'm not sure what worms would think of the glittery horses and stars that kids put on their envelopes!

## Establishing an orchard

Hello Jackie,

I'm a recent subscriber and I read a really interesting article by Jackie on establishing an orchard. As I am about to put one in place myself, I was hoping I might be able to learn a bit more as there was really only a paragraph or two!

The advice Jackie gave was to plant the trees every three years on the drip line of the previous planting's trees, the benefits being to reduce weeds and encourage birds to eat from above, leaving the middle crop for people!

I was wondering if Jackie or *Earth Garden* could point me in the direction of more detailed information on this? Is there a book, for example, that deals specifically with organic orchards? Regards, Julian.

Hi Julian,

I think your best bet is a general orchard book, like Louis Glowinski's *Complete Book of Fruit Growing*, plus books on organic growing. I haven't written one specifically on orchards, but *Natural Control of Common Pests*

gives a complete rundown on establishing pest-free orchards and keeping them that way, *Soil Food* on feeding various farm and garden systems, including orchards, *Companion Planting* on ... well, you get the idea. Plus there is the *Best of Jackie French* which is about growing (and using) just about everything. *Earth Garden* books will have them all.

But as a very basic guide:

**Step 1.** Plant the hardiest trees you can find ... scout around your neighbourhood for ones in neglected paddocks that have survived drought, wallabies and whatever else your region can throw at them.

**Step 2.** Plant in rows, at a conventional distance apart. Run drippers along the line and mulch them well.

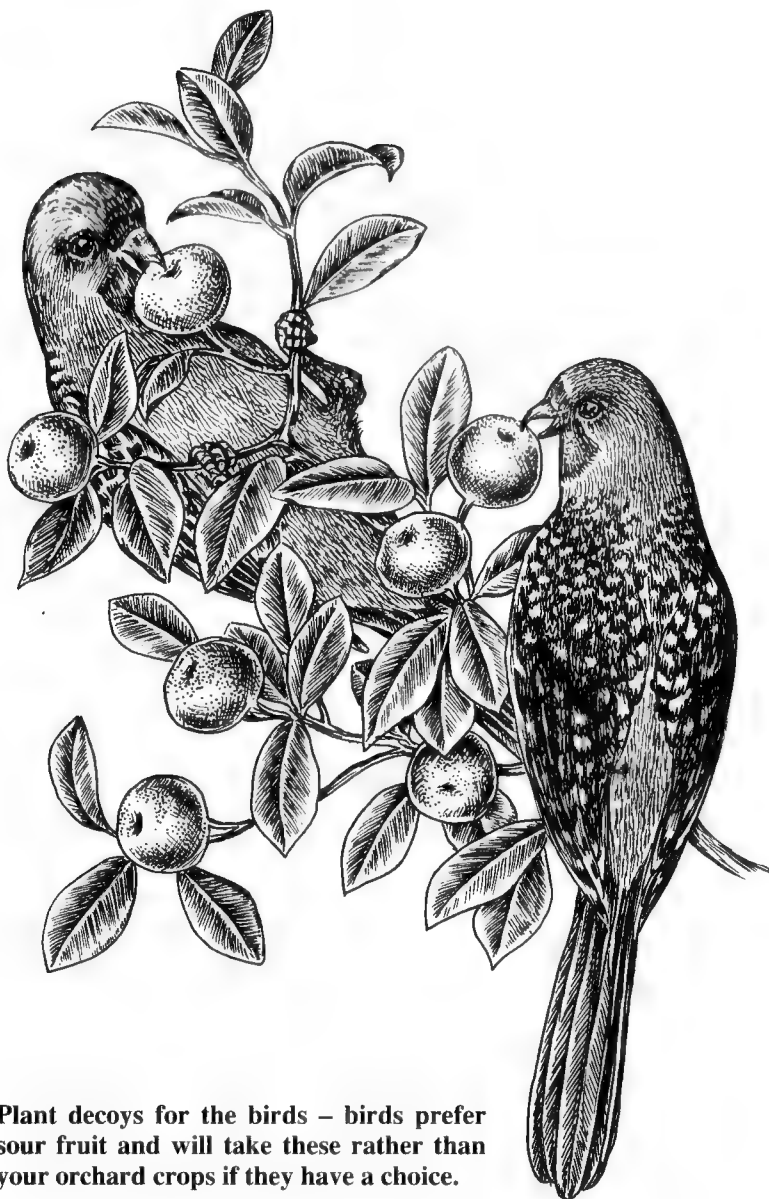
**Step 3.** As soon as they are twice your height plant less hardy trees just under their outer leaves. Run secondary drip lines to these trees. Mulch well.

**Step 4.** Keep bunging on the mulch – anything which has once lived that will break down. Once the soil gets going it'll even digest large tree trunks in a year or so.

**Step 5.** Plant native shrubs, any members of the salvia family and parsnips that will flower and go to seed to attract birds and other predators to eat your pests.

**Step 6.** Add animals, like chooks, wombats and geese to eat fallen fruit to help keep down pests. (If wallabies are a problem put each tree in a wire guard, then prune the lower branches as they grow till the trees are out of wallaby reach.)

**Step 7.** As the trees grow add vines to



Plant decoys for the birds – birds prefer sour fruit and will take these rather than your orchard crops if they have a choice.

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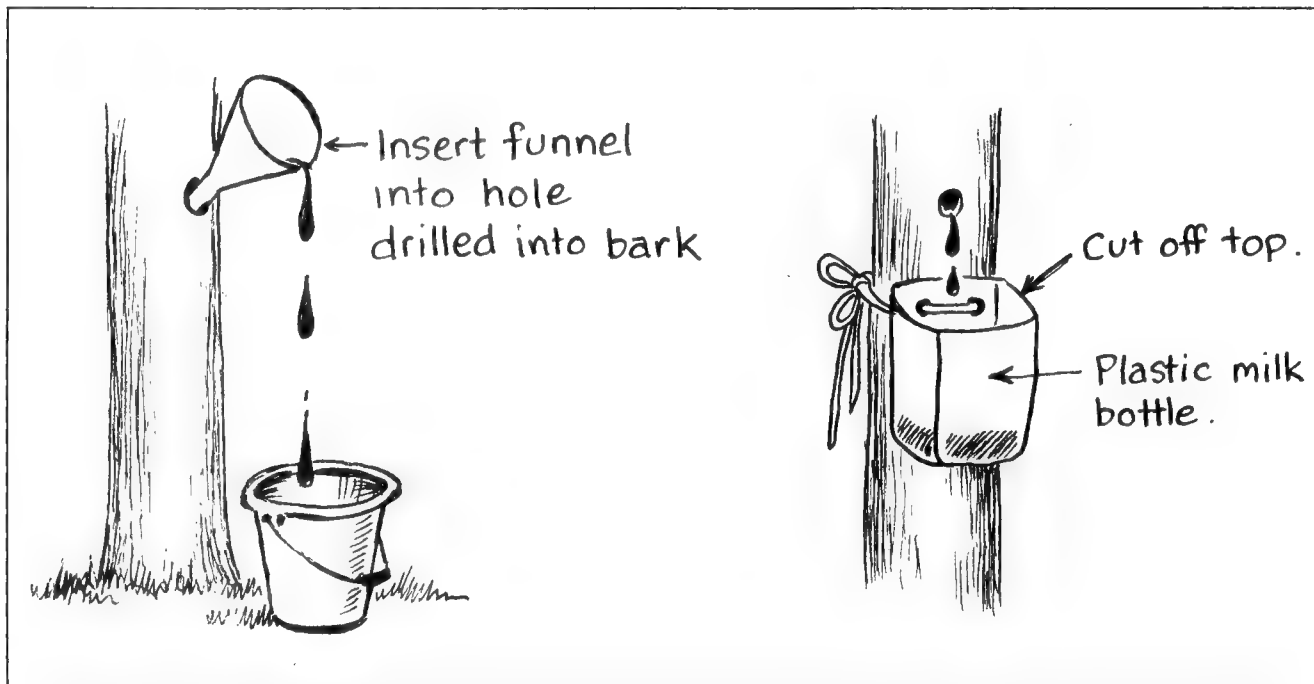
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If you live in an area where deciduous trees grow well and give good autumn colour, then you can grow a sugar maple.

clamber up the outer ones, like hops, choko, chilicayote, passionfruit, grape, banana passionfruit, kiwi fruit, rambling roses, wisteria... not too early though or they'll overwhelm and choke them.

**Step 8.** You'll now have some trees with good thick canopies and trees around them. Put in the tropics or subtropics that will grow in shade, eventually poking their heads above the canopy – mango, avocado, lychee, jackfruit, saimoa, tamarillo, jaboticoba, many sports of lilly-pillies.

**Step 9.** Plant decoys for the birds – birds prefer sour fruit and will take these rather than your orchard crops if they have a choice: lots of lilly-pillies as I write this, and ignoring the ripe Lady Williams apples a few metres away. They haven't got stuck into the calamondins yet – like small, sour but very prolific cumquats – but they will at the same time as our navel oranges are ready. Given a choice between a small sour calamondin and a ripe juicy navel, they'll take the calamondin any time.

**Step 10.** Keep mulching – if the mulch is thin it's time to add more. Add trace elements every couple of decades, a scatter of dolomite and rock phosphate once a decade or two, especially if most of your mulch is homegrown weeds.

**Step 11.** If you are very energetic grow lucerne between the trees for slashing and add Russian garlic around trees that get brown rot or curly leaf. But once a good orchard is established there is damn-all room or sunlight for lucerne!

**Step 12.** Buy or make a long-handled picker for fruit you can't reach, like avocados twenty metres up.

**Step 13.** Beware of chocayotes, bunya nuts, chokoes etc falling on your head.

**Step 14.** If you didn't get chooks in Step 6, get some now to eat the surplus or damaged fruit. Encourage wildlife under your trees too, to eat windfalls that might harbour pests.

But basically – plant, water, mulch, eat... then plant some more...

## Organic maple syrup

Dear Jackie,

I've just finished reading *Backyard Self Sufficiency* and loved it. Thanks for your inspiration. I am especially taken with the idea of growing a sugar maple tree to provide for our family's (expensive) hankerings for organic maple syrup. We live in the hills north of Melbourne so I assume the climate is suitable. Can you advise me: would one tree be sufficient (they're huge!)? Dappled sun okay? How does one tap the syrup? How old must the tree be before this can be done? How often do we tap? Thanks!

And one final question... the gums drop so much bark and leaves, can I use them as mulch on fruit trees and veggie beds, or only on native plants?

Thanks, Kate.

Dear Kate,

Maple syrup is the sap from the sugar maple tree. If you live in an area where deciduous trees grow well and give good autumn colour, then you can grow a sugar maple or, better still, six of them if you are fond of maple syrup (I love the stuff). Do make sure they are sugar maples, not

some other sort of maple.

Australia probably doesn't get quite cold enough in most places to get really massive sap flows. But you can get a pretty decent one. You do need cold nights and warm days, too, so sugar maples aren't really good for coastal areas where you don't get great differences in day and night temperatures. The trees may grow, but you won't get a good flow (though you may get some, which you may find worth it).

Sugar maples traditionally grow on steep rocky slopes, in full sun. We grow ours by the creek – maples need reasonably moist soil – in semi-shade, as we are in a deep valley and semi-shade is what most of the place gets a lot of the time. But you do get better sap flows if the trees are in full sunlight.

Trees vary enormously in how much sap they give. The bigger the tree, the more sap and the more leaf area, the more sap too. A good tree in the USA will give about 675 litres of sap. We get about 13.5 litres, but our trees are very young and also I don't want to risk stressing them, especially given the run of dry years. Our springs are also much shorter than those in good sugar country – we have maybe three or four suitable weeks for gathering sap, instead of two or three months or more.

It's pretty easy to get the syrup. Wait till your tree

has a trunk at least as thick as your arm – you can kill it if you take too much sap from it when it's young.

Then choose a day in late winter or early spring when it's warm during the day but still cold at night and all the buds on the trees are just starting to swell but haven't turned into leaves yet. (Don't take sap after leaf burst or from a very young tree – you'll kill the tree). There is more sap on the side with the largest branches.

Now either cut off a low branch or use a drill to put a small hole in the bark – about 25 to 50 mm deep, just enough for the sap to flow. (Commercial sap takers put more than one tap in a tree – I wouldn't risk that in Australia.) You can insert a funnel into the hole, so it drips out into a bucket on the ground but I never have. Instead I use an old plastic milk bottle to catch my sap. Cut the top off, then put two holes in the top and thread string through. This is so you can tie it to the tree. The plastic is supple and fits tightly around the trunk.

The sap will start running just like a tap has been turned on – sometimes running steadily, sometimes just going drip, drip, drip. (There is an enormous difference in how individual trees behave.) It'll fill your container and probably another two or three before it stops, so keep an eye on it. In our climate the sap can run for three or four days and nights, slowly getting less and less each day, and

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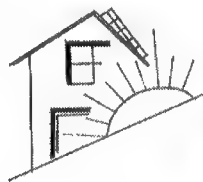
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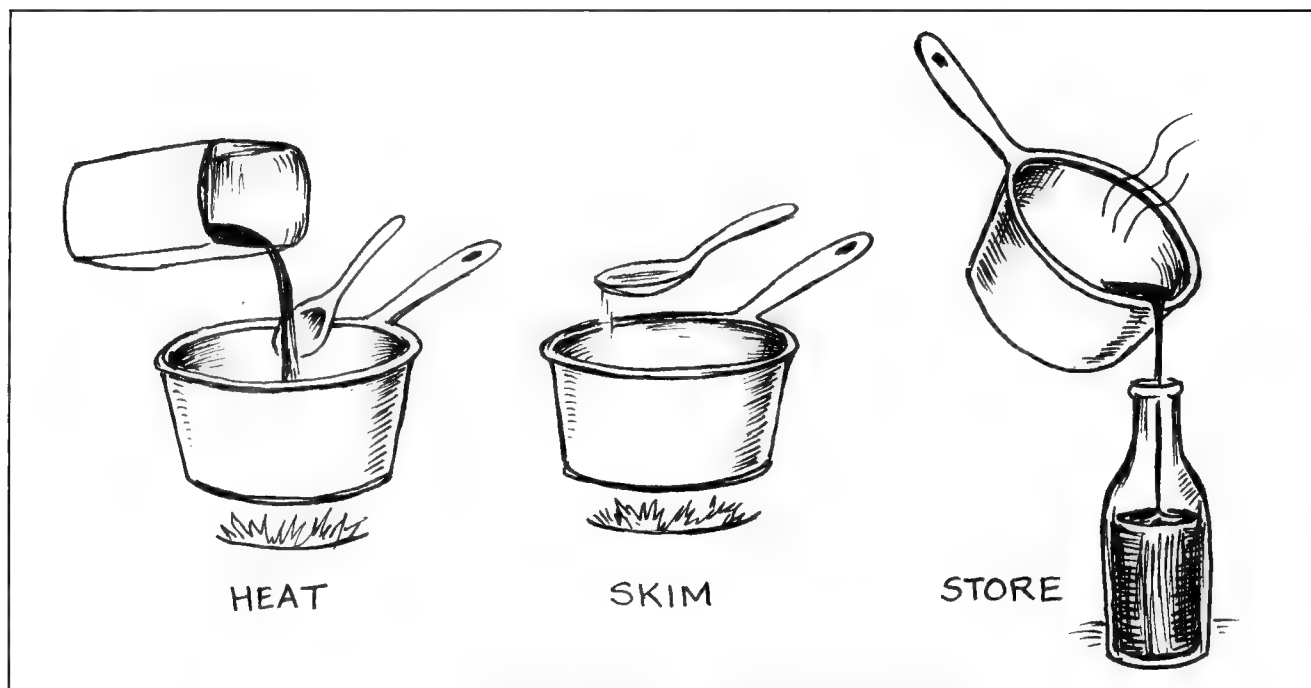
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**Heat your maple sap till it starts to boil but don't let it burn.**

then oozes for a few days after that.

The sap won't taste very sweet – it'll be about three

per cent sugar, though it can vary between one per cent and 12 per cent. Forty litres of sap will give you about a litre of thick syrup, but this varies a lot.

Don't leave your sap for longer than overnight, and cover it too – if any yeast gets into it, it can ferment and turn sour or if it rains or there is a heavy dew it becomes even more dilute.

Now pour your sap into a saucepan. (Strain out any beetles or bits of bark first.) Heat the sap till it starts to boil. Don't let it burn, but do keep up a high heat – you need to boil it fast as long, slow cooking will make it turn dark and spoil the flavour. Skim off all white or grey or black foam. Boil till it's thick, a bit like runny honey. Or just keep tasting. When it tastes rich and sweet you know it's boiled enough. Pour it into sterilised bottles while it's still hot. Store in a cool dark place. Throw out if it bubbles or grows fungi, looks cloudy, smells odd or in any other way changes state.

Great on pancakes or icecream or use it instead of sugar in cakes and biscuits. Far better than sugar in gingerbread! Makes glorious baked apples – core, pour in syrup, bake till apples are soft.

PS. Syrup can be boiled and boiled till it turns into toffee, or boiled to toffee then whipped vigorously as it cools so that it turns into a sort of brittle sugary toffee that can be bashed with a rolling pin to make a very sticky sugar.

PPS. The hole in the tree will heal by itself. Don't tap the same spot next year.  
All the best, Jackie.

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# THE TRUTH ABOUT SOAP

Many readers have written to *Earth Garden* over the years requesting recipes for caustic-free soap, which has led Stefan, who has worked for many years in the soap making industry, to write the following article.

by Stefan Greenwood

**I** HAVE had the pleasure of indulging in the age-old art of soap making for many years now, but try as hard as I may, I have not been able to dispel the many myths that surround this subject. I hope the following information will save many readers from being caught out by unscrupulous vendors.

## Caustic-free soaps

The simple, truthful answer to this is, it does not exist. No matter what anyone ever tries to tell you differently, soap cannot be made anywhere without caustic soda (lye). But remember that the amount of caustic that soap contains is miniscule when measured against the total percentage of ingredients per bar, and the process that soap making undergoes renders the caustic all but harmless to all but the very few unfortunates. Even liquid soaps must contain a form of caustic in order to become soap.

It is caustic soda that creates the necessary chemical (catalyst) reaction that turns combined vegetable oils and/or animal fats into useable bars of soap. Without it you will have nothing but a soggy mess on your hands that is good for nothing. So the rule is, no caustic (lye); no soap.

I have taken many an untruthful market vendor to task over this matter when I have spotted their signs stating "caustic-free soap", and found that they have absolutely no idea of the processes involved in soap making. It is actually a punishable offence in Australian law to make such a claim.

Whilst talking of offences in law and soap matters, I would like to add that it is also an offence for any manufacturer, or vendor to state, or lead anyone to believe that any soap product will grant any therapeutic gain to the user unless the product has under-

gone conclusive testing to prove such.

Unfortunately this is widely ignored and many a claim is being made that such and such a soap product will do this, that, or the other to benefit the skin with use, but much of this is based on consumer ignorance or unproven fact.

The only claim that I have ever made when supplying my soaps to anyone is that it will clean, with the hope that enough benefits remain from the essential oils and other ingredients to help in some way, but I have no proof that they will or will not. Nor does anyone else for that matter. Depending upon the ingredients used in my various recipes I do know that I can adjust the feel of the soap when used, for example by adding real raw silk and luxury oils etc to the blend.

It is true that additives may be combined in some forms of soap at certain stages of the manufacturing process, and this is done constantly in commercial lines, but not all are beneficial. In fact without certain additives many soaps would not lather. Glycerin soaps are one such product that requires a lathering agent to be added, as this type of soap is in fact a by-product of true soap.

It never ceases to surprise me that the majority of



The simple truth is that caustic-free soap does not exist.

glycerin soap users believe it to be the purest type of soap available when in fact it is quite possibly the most chemically heavy soap on the market today.

## Two main processes

I should make a distinction between the two main soap making processes so that readers are not misled when shopping for soaps in all price ranges.

The first, and indeed purest soap available, is known as cold process, or spap. This is the only form that I make myself for personal use and for sale to my expanding customer base around Australia. The second form is known as melt and pour, or MP soap, which in fact is soap in granulated or flaked form that may have had additives combined to it, or other things taken away from it as in the case of glycerin soap.

Soaps are made starting from the raw material stage using various blends of vegetable oils with animal fats and milks in some cases. As the name suggests, all ingredients are combined together in a cold or mildly warm state and it is the caustic soda (lye) that creates the chemical reaction that turns the liquid mass into the solid matter that we all recognise as a common bar of soap. This is then left to cure for a time before sale or use.

MP soaps take over after the curing stage of soap. This is when the cured soap is either granulated or flaked in its straightforward form to be sold to the consumer so

that they can re-melt it at home and pour it into a mould combined with various commercial colourings and scents so that they may claim that they make their own soaps.

The alternative to the above is where the soap is rendered down commercially to gain the required elements that make glycerin soap. This then requires the addition of the lathering agents that I spoke of earlier, colourings and scents in order to be turned into commercially marketed soaps, or to be sold as yet another form of MP soap for the would-be or could-be home soap maker.

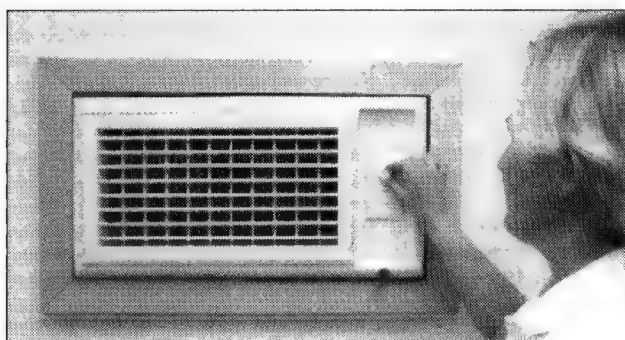
It is in the MP soap making process that the untruths creep into the soaping story because with this process there is no sighting of caustic soda due to the fact that the adding of this seemingly taboo element was carried out before it reached the commercial or MP soap maker, thereby leading them to believe that caustic soda has never been a part of the picture.

## Liquid soap

Liquid soaps are made using an entirely different process that requires boiling and so on for extended periods. But although it requires a different type of caustic, it still requires this agent to make it happen. A good soap maker will have an excellent knowledge of what elements may be used in their product to colour, enrich, preserve and enhance it naturally, and never resort to the use of chemical additives.

They will also know the best percentages of each and every ingredient to include in a batch to bring about the best effects in their product such as moisturising and so on, whereas the MP soap maker may have no clue to these arts. Commercial soap producers will add any required extras, such as moisturisers, colours and fragrant oils, at the milling stage of their MP soap making process.

Finally, it should be remembered that just because some body product stores practise greener packaging ways it does not follow that they sell pure soaps or skin care products. In fact the truth is that their products are invariably produced using standard commercial practices leaving the consumer to fill in the rest of the story as they choose to believe.



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# How to make an agave didgeridoo

In the final of this three part series, Scot describes how to make our indigenous instrument from the agave plant.

by Scot Gardner  
*Churchill, Victoria.*

**T**HERE are about 400 species in the family *Agavaceae*. They are a mob of succulents that have found homes in the arid regions of the world and become important commercial crops in some countries (Tequila in Mexico from *Agave tequilana weber azul* and fibre from *Agave sisalana* in parts of Africa). As a family they prefer fairly dry conditions in full sun and will tolerate rain but a frost will kill them when they're little.

The agave (pronounced a-gar-vay) is essentially a collection of long fleshy leaves with terminal spikes that form a spiky rosette. There's not much of a stem. They live from about five to 50 years and are 'semelparous' by nature, meaning the end of their life is marked by a stupendous flowering event. The flower stem emerges and can grow to four metres tall in a matter of weeks, sucking the life from the parent plant. After the parent dies, a dozen or more offset babies may form on the withered roots, creating a ring of plants that if left unchecked will grow for another generation, produce a ring of fine flower stems that all eventually fall over and start the cycle again. Rings of wild agave that I've found in the goldfields of central Victoria and in outback NSW have been more than twenty metres across and made of thirty or forty mature plants.

In Australia, the big agaves (like *Agave americana*—the Century plant—and the bluish *Agave sisalana*) were the front garden equivalent of the Hills hoists and many of the ones planted in the sixties and seventies are coming in to flower. Go for a drive and you'll find them volunteering to grow on roadsides all over the country. American agave didg maker Allan Shockley has said that some of the best agave stems in the world grow in central Australia.

Most of the stems I've harvested have been cut from dead plants with the fascinated permission of the landholder. Because more than one instrument can be made from a single big stem, I usually offer a didg in exchange. On public land, like roadside verges, they're weeds and free to be gleaned.

Scot demonstrates the finished result.



## Making the didgeridoo

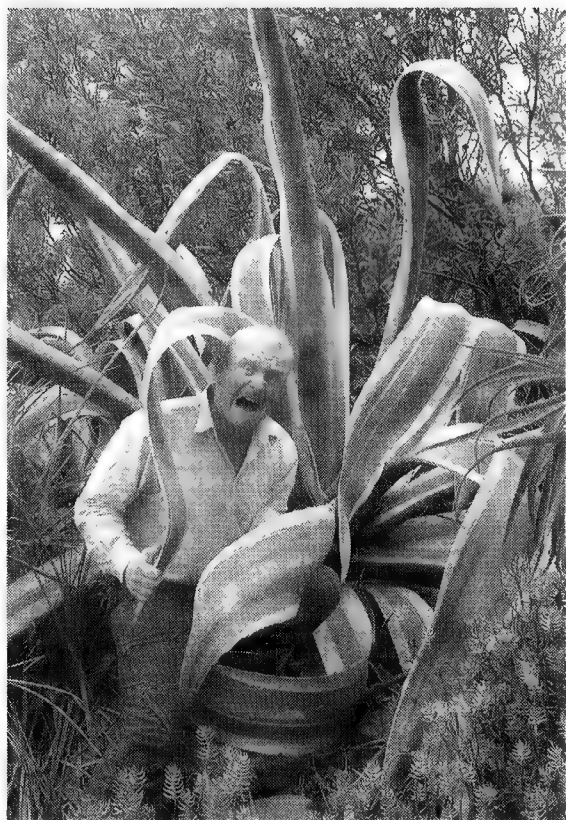
The stem needs to be dry. Stems cut from desiccated old plants are usually ready to go but stems cut green may take twelve months to dry. The flowers are borne on branches near the top and can be removed when you cut back to a clean external diameter of about 50 mm. The outside is rough, often covered with the dried remains of rudimentary leaves but it can be cleaned up later.

The flower stem is strong light timber on the outside and pithy in the middle. It can be split with an old long-bladed knife or a machete. Hunt for a weakness or crack in the wall and arrange your knife across one end to follow the crack. Using a mallet or a lump of wood, tap alternate ends of the knife, driving it like a wedge until the stem is split in two lengthways exposing the pithy core.

Removing the pith to create the hollow is a fun job. Scratch and scrape with whatever tools you have available—a stout bladed hobby knife, a screwdriver, a chisel or a combination of every pointy tool you can find in the shed. Finish off with a half-round rasp and sandpaper. You can be as basic or fussy as you like with the insides, though the less pith, the cleaner the finished tone.

You can seal the insides of the stick while it's in two halves. Paint it with a non-toxic and durable timber finish that resists moisture. If you have access to a supply of bees wax, don't worry about the sealing until later.

When the centre is hollowed, run a bead of wood glue along the split edges and reassemble the two halves. You can bind them together with baling twine or whatever you



**The agave plant is common in this country but there are traps for the unwary.**

have handy. I prefer cable ties. Align the splits as close as possible to their original position and piggyback shorter cable ties to circle the stick at 15 cm intervals. Set it aside for a day or so.

The stem could be four or five metres long when harvested. That's a mammoth didgeridu. It's easier to work with a single length so I usually leave the sticks whole until after I've treated the inside.

## Bees wax

If you've all ready painted the inside of your stick



**This is what you need:  
a fine specimen of the agave  
flower stem.**

then you can skip this section. Otherwise, you'll need about a kilo of bees wax from an apiarist (expect to pay between \$5 and \$15 a kilo). The didg can be given a once-only internal seal by pouring melted bees wax inside. You need two big old pots or tins and the wax has to be pretty hot. Put one pot under the bottom of the didg and pour the melted wax from the other pot into the top while gently rotating the stick. Reheat the wax and repeat, occasionally swapping the didg end-for-end, until the inside is coated.

The string or cable ties can now be removed and the stem cut into useable lengths.

A good playable didg is usually about 1.3 to 1.5 metres long though longer and shorter instruments work. They're just harder to play. The outside can then be sanded, polished, decorated and sealed to your taste.

## A wax mouthpiece

We make a wax mouthpiece to make playing more comfortable and to reduce the size of the playing end. Warm the wax over a low heat then take a lump and mould it in your hands until it is soft, pliable and uniform in texture. Make a snake of wax by rubbing the lump between your palms. Join the head to the tail to make a donut of wax that is pushed onto the end of the didj and shaped—while warm—to make a mouthpiece of 25 to 35 mm internal diameter. It's important to push some of the wax inside the mouthpiece end and blend it with the wall of the didg. It has to make an airtight seal.

## Playing

There are some people who believe women shouldn't play the didgeridoo. Whether you are a man or a woman, if your garden agave didg playing leads you to performances on the streets of metaphorical Rome, be respectful and do as the Romans do. Playing the didg can be like burping in public. Some people are going to be offended, some will be entertained. If you're in company, ask before you blast.

Loose lips sink ships ... and play didgeridus. Make a raspberry sound with your lips pressed against the wax mouthpiece. Vary the pressure and volume of air until the vibration is smooth and warm. Try combining the sound made with your lips with some noises (shrieking, screaming, singing) from your voice box. To circular breathe, use the little reserve of air in your cheeks to keep the sound going while you sniff in to top up your lungs. It takes practice but you can make beautiful music from your garden agave didg without circular breathing. You can charm your neighbours and tickle your carrots in the same breath.

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# TREE HOUSE WONDERLAND

**For some, wishes are simply fantasies that that might become reality in an ideal world, but not in this one. This is the story of someone who made her dream happen.**

**by Jen Robinson**  
*Mullaloo, Western Australia.*

**F**ULFILLING a dream or a promise you made to yourself when you were a child brings a unique satisfaction. It's like stepping back in time and acknowledging the child you were, who is part of the adult you have become.

My tree house dream started long ago, with makeshift planks balanced on a couple of boughs and a rope dangling for a swing. When I closed my eyes and whooshed on that rope, anything felt possible. The tree was in a neighbour's home, so it didn't really feel like it was completely mine. I longed for my own tree house and promised myself "when I grow up I'm going to have a tree house just for me". Move forward over twenty years and my tree house dream resurfaced.

## The wish

While working with children and their families at a wish granting charity I became conscious of how children dream and believe in the possibilities of their dreams. Adults seemed to meander through life, thinking of daily tasks and chores to be done. I noticed how they often spoke of their wishes. I started to wonder what would I wish for? I asked my husband, Nath, what he would wish for. We decided to think of our wishes over a week and then talk about them at a "wish dinner".

We wrote our three wishes on a piece of paper and



**Jen, and the wish that came true.**

then exchanged papers. My wishes were for a vegie patch, a tree house and chooks. Nath wished to live near the sea and have a boat. That night was a turning point for us: we wondered why we weren't moving towards our dreams, our simple wishes.

## The next step

On the basis of that night, we decided to sell our home. We lived in a town house and our wishes would not be possible with the land area and location of our little town house. There wasn't an established tree and even if we planted one, it would be too small in the space we have available. There wasn't enough room for a vegie patch and our home was on the river, not near the beach. We sold our house six weeks later and began the search for a home that would enable us to create our wishes. Try telling a real estate agent you need a house with an established tree for a tree house!!

We eventually found our home in Mullaloo, Perth. It's an old beachside suburb. In the back garden a river gum stump stood 16 feet high – the perfect home for a tree house.

Over the past two years we have slowly built our garden. We've removed Japanese pepper trees and planted fruit trees; we've built garden beds and mulched; bought small seedlings and watched them grow (we figured we had more time than money); we've built paths, retaining walls and stairs and the garden has finally come together. There's such a simple pleasure in planting something and watching it grow. We have used leftover paint to sketch



**Jen seals the cedar weatherboards before fixing, while the wall frames await completion of the floor.**

murals and old tiles to make mosaics. The garden is filled with treasures, all with a story attached.

The vegie garden is growing, the fruit trees budding, the chookie palace is nearly built and the tree house stands proud looming over the garden. I'm getting ahead of myself – I must tell you more about the tree house.

I drew a picture of my tree house wish and then set about sketching small details. When you even think you wish, it feels like you can visit it in your mind. You can start to live it, to imagine what it would be like. Each time I thought of it, it was like visiting it in my mind. I could climb the ladder and open the windows, sit in the chair and listen to the birds – all that and it hadn't been built yet! I think we could all do with a lot more imagining time in our day.

We checked with the local council on size regulations and dimensions permissible for tree houses, and then got some quotes on the wood and structures. The base needed to be very solid, as the tree house would be built on a large stump. The position of the tree house was considered in relation to the sun, ensuring it wouldn't get too hot in the summer. We needed it to be big enough for us to have a weekend sleep-over (a different version of camping!). The windows needed to capture the view of the park, without intruding on our neighbours on either side. Most of all, *the tree house needed to be magical.*

## **The practicalities**

The materials needed to be termite resistant: Perth is known for its white ants. The roof needed to shelter, but also capture the fun of the tree house. This wasn't a room in the sky – it was a tree house. They are very different things.

Getting a builder to help was difficult. Trades-

men weren't interested; many thought I was joking when I asked for a quote to be done. We eventually found a wonderful builder who understood my reasons for wanting a tree house – at last a fellow dreamer! He could only spare one day. What he and his sons could get done in a day they would do, the rest was up to us.

A steel frame base was made in line with the counterweight needed for the boughs of the tree. The walls were formed on the ground, and then raised when the floor was made. We used treated pine for the frames and cedar weatherboards for the outside cladding. The roof was made from Colourbond.

We used scaffolding to reach the wall frames, nailing the cedar onto the main structure. We bought the windows and doors from the odd salvage yard and friends gave us old bits and pieces they had post home renovation. This made the tree house full of our friends' memories too – simply wonderful.

When the tree house started to take shape, we realised it was much bigger than we had thought it would be. Sure, we had mapped it out on the ground and Nath had even made a scale model. But, when it was off the ground, things look much bigger!

## **What we learnt along the way**

Bush poles were still needed to support the tree house, as it didn't have any supporting structures such as other trees to ensure the tree was stable. We sealed the cedar before we nailed it to the wall frames – the cost of the sealant as very expensive and something we hadn't budgeted for.

We returned the scaffolding before we had fully installed the roof. This made installing the roof much harder than we thought. Nath attached himself to the roof with abseiling ropes; luckily there were no accidents.

## **The tree house dream comes true**

Adults often ask why we have a tree house and when I answer: "It's my dream," they still ask why. A child has never asked why I have a tree house. It's my retreat, my haven, and my special place. To get in the tree house, you need to climb a rope ladder. Only three adults have ever been able to climb it. I haven't met a child who can't climb it. My tree house has a comfy chair and a menagerie of garden books and my seeds for next season. There are pictures of my family on the walls and cosy rugs on the floor. When it rains it's a wonderful place to be. I feel my whole body smiling.

To live your dream you don't need move a million miles away. You can create your dreams without moving to the country. Often Earth Gardeners talk about their rural retreats. I'd love to hear more stories about what people have accomplished in urban areas too.

Happy dreaming....

The wall frames  
go up.



• Want to find out more about tree houses of the world? Try these books: *The House That Jack Built: Tree Houses by David Pearson* (2001); Gaia Books Limited. *The Tree House Book* by Peter and Judy Nelson with David Larkin (2000); Universe Publishing.

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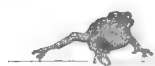
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# Permaculture

## in Hindsight



Since the introduction of permaculture what progress has been made in applying its principles? Bruce continues his review of 25 years of permaculture and adds up his scorecard.

by Bruce Hedger

*Newham, Victoria.*

**I**N THE previous issue of EG, David Holmgren told us of his embracing modern technology to spread the permaculture message. He and Su Dennett recently attended the world permaculture convergence IPC7, in Croatia where both he and Bill Mollison gave presentations.

David recently confirmed and upgraded some of the original principles of permaculture in an article for *The Permaculture Activist* online at [www.permacultureactivist.net](http://www.permacultureactivist.net).

These are his guidelines, with a comment from my own practical experience about how difficult or easy we've found each one to implement in our own life.

**1. Reduce, Reuse, Recycle** (in that order). I'd like to think we've gone some way towards doing this over the past few years. However, I heard recently that a computer uses the same amount of embodied energy to produce as a small car, so I feel very guilty at dumping two previous computers and a printer which were totally obsolete.

**2. Grow a garden and eat what it produces.** We are managing more each year. Our fruit trees, berries, and vegetable garden produce for six to seven months of the year in this climate. You lucky readers in northern climes are no doubt chuckling at that! I'm recycling a local greenhouse to add to our existing one, and this will extend our growing season into June and beyond, especially for herbs and lettuce. Fresh food instead of frozen, electricity using food! Luxury!! OK, we should be bottling or drying more... I know, I know!!

**3. Avoid imported resources where possible.** I tried to buy a suit the other day to replace my aging Aus-

tralian made, very comfortable (expensive!) 15-year-old one. All made in China. At least there is still a local sock factory in Kyneton making excellent socks, but I wonder how long?

**4. Use labour and skill in preference to materials and technology.** My profession is photography. Over the last three years, there has been a technological revolution which has rendered five-year-old state-of-the-art film-based equipment obsolete. Instantly. Overnight. My skill and labour is the same, but materials and technology are world-based. None out of ten for this one!

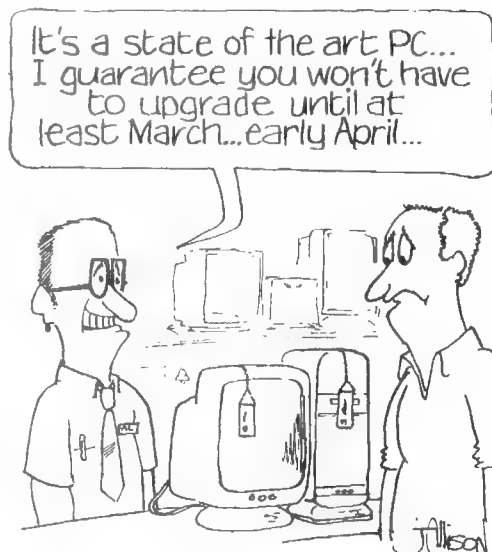
**5. Design, build and purchase for durability and repairability.** I'd like to think

my vehicle purchases and camera equipment reflect this point reasonably well. Time spent talking to friends or researching best buys will pay off in the long run. My previous profession was camera repair. The seventies mechanical film cameras from any of the major manufacturers were beautifully made precision instruments. Most are still repairable. But who will do it? Many technicians have retired, and spare parts are uncommon. And film is all but dead in the water for professionals today. All that magnificent technology is sitting in cupboards, unused and unloved! Astounding!

**6. Use resources for their greatest potential use** (for exam-

ple electricity for tools and lighting, food scraps for animal feed). Add gas for cooking, hot water bottles and hats for warmth in cold rooms, and rechargeable batteries as a short list. I'm sure you'll be able to add many more.

**7. Use renewable resources wherever possible even if local environmental costs appear higher** (for example wood rather than electricity for fuel and timber rather than steel for construction). We're not bad on that one, but I do wonder at the pollution from wood stoves in some areas, especially towns in sheltered valleys on



cold still winter mornings. Certainly today's timber technology for construction is much better than it was a couple of decades ago, but it seems most of our scrap metal is being exported to China instead of being used here, so as a country, we're not that good.

**8. Use non-renewable and embodied energies primarily to establish sustainable systems** (for example passive solar housing, food gardens, water storage, forests).

As an example, David suggests that the use of bulldozers to build well-designed dams capable of lasting hundreds of years in well-managed landscapes is an appropriate use of non-renewable energies. I'd suggest that instead of exporting our huge reserves of North-West Shelf gas, we use it to power a grid-interactive photovoltaic panel manufacturing industry. This industry would be bigger than the car industry, and use Australian materials to create a product that would give jobs to immense numbers of Australians, as well as export opportunities and energy on a decentralised grid which could not be knocked out by a well-aimed terrorist bomb. Like a nuclear power station could be. Oh, yeah, the technology already exists, too. But that's too simple, isn't it?

**9. When using high technology (for example computers) avoid using state-of-the-art equipment.** Oh, I'm afraid I'm very guilty, having upgraded my computer, 'cos the old one couldn't handle the large files

of modern photography. But I'm reasonably confident I won't be upgrading again for quite a while, so it's not so bad. And anyway my thirty-year-old amplifier, tuner and speakers are still excellent. Or is my hearing deteriorating at a faster rate than the speakers?

**10. Avoid debt and long distance commuting.** One's own circumstances will undoubtedly come in to play here, but the principle is still absolutely sound. But is it better to go in to debt to pay for a solar panel, or LPG car conversion, or gravity feed tank? If the immediate savings are more than the interest on the loan, is that feasible? I don't know – can an economist help?

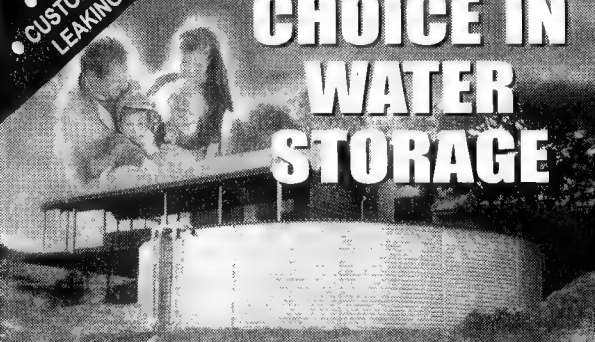
**11. Reduce taxation by earning less.** An interesting one, this. We still pay GST on most things we consume, don't we? I don't like my taxes going to the military effort in Iraq, but I do think we should pay for socially useful projects which benefit us all.

**12. Develop a home-based lifestyle, be domestically responsible.** I'd like to think we've gone down that road reasonably well, but it's never ending, isn't it? Hopefully our three kids will take some of our lifestyle into their own lives in future. Have any of you stories of your children going down the opposite road?

Challenging ideas, eh? Contributions welcomed at bahedge@bigpond.com.

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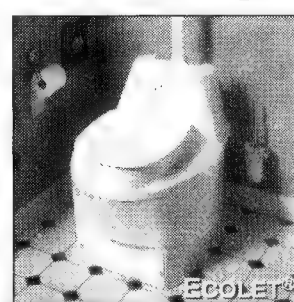
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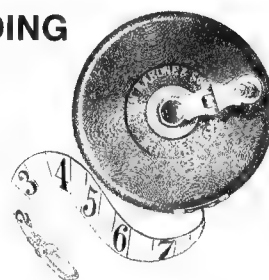
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# WHAT'S YOUR PROBLEM?

## BOB RICH ANSWERS QUESTIONS ABOUT OWNER BUILDING

Bob Rich has been writing for *Earth Garden* since 1980. He is happy to answer your building-related enquiries. Email him at [bobrich@bobswriting.com](mailto:bobrich@bobswriting.com). or write to him at LPO Box 214, Healesville, Vic. 3777 (with a stamped return envelope). If you don't want your correspondence printed, send \$20 with the question. You might also like to visit him at [www.mudsmith.net/](http://www.mudsmith.net/).



### Soil types for mudbricks

Hi there,

I've recently bought a copy of *The Mud Brick Adventure* by Andrew Bianco. I have all the information I need except what mud types are best – clay soils, lime soils...?

I'm looking at a block of land that I will get soil tested then I'll need to know if it will be acceptable when the results are in. Could you let me know this or suggest some other literature on mudbrick building that has the required info. Thanks, Kellee.

Dear Kellee,

Here is a shortened section from the *Earth Garden Building Book*, titled "Any soil will do". All the complexities of soil science can be reduced to two questions:

- Does this soil form a hard lump when it dries out? If yes, it's suitable for mudbricks.
- If it's compressed when just damp, will it hold together? Then it's suitable for rammed earth.

### Sand/clay ratio

Clay consists of small particles that attract water until each has a film of water around it. After this, water can't pass through. When the mud dries, the particles attract each other to form a dense, hard mass.

In the building trades, any granular, crystalline soil is called "sand". Under pressure the crystals lock together like a three-dimensional jigsaw, but need something to bind them. This may be clay or cement or both.

Near-100 per cent clay makes good mudbricks, but only with backbreaking work (it's sticky stuff). Some clays are "reactive"; they swell and shrink with changes in moisture content and crack on drying. Straw is needed for this type of soil. It isn't reinforcement, but a network of holes to distribute shrinkage stresses. Adding sand or even topsoil can stop cracking, improve workability and reduce drying time. Other clays are kaolin-rich: there is little or no cracking as the soil dries. The only additive needed is hard work.

The ideal soil for rammed earth is 75 per cent sand. A higher sand content means that cement has to be added. The proportion of cement can be worked out through trials, but five per cent is typical. However, if the clay content is

too high (approaching 50 per cent), the compression force has to be much greater and the wall may crack.

The ideal mudbrick soil has enough clay for the bricks to be solid, say 50 to 75 per cent clay content — not a heavy, sticky 100 per cent. Soil with too much sand can be stabilised by adding cement. Ideal soil of either kind is rare, but use what you have.

Clearly, you need to establish the sand/clay ratio. Remove any stones from a handful of soil. Put it in a glass jar, fill with water, then vigorously shake. Let it stand. Coarse sand settles out immediately, fine sand in less than a minute. Clay takes 30 to 60 minutes depending on its chemical composition. Fine silt may float for up to three days.

After a while, the jar will contain distinct layers. Carefully tip out the water and examine each layer. Even the finest sand feels gritty while clay feels soapy. Silt is of little interest, though too much makes mudbricks soft and easily damaged by water. This is unlikely to be a problem.

There is one complication. Soil varies remarkably in composition, even over an area as small as a house site. There are usually distinct layers as you dig down and these can vary from spot to spot. A friend's site yielded two soil types at one depth and three others lower down. So, test as many samples as you can, from different spots, at several depths.

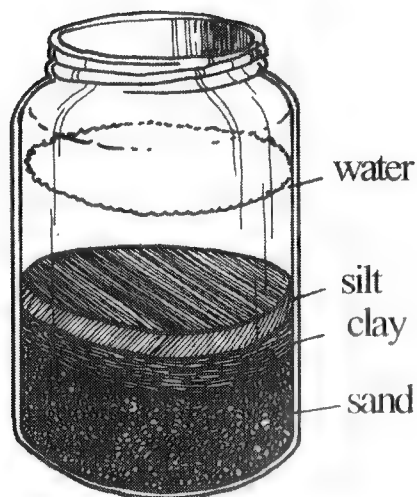
Always be aware of changes in your soil. At first, changes may lead to failures like cracked bricks. These are learning experiences: ask what made a previously good method fail.

### Test runs

Regardless of the outcome of your tests, try out all the soil types you find. Make test mudbricks and rammed earth samples from each. This is the only way of acquiring a feel for what the soil can do.

It's easy to make a mudbrick mould from scrap materials, so it's worthwhile making a few test bricks even if you don't intend to build with mudbricks. This should be done in summer when the chances of the mudbrick cracking are highest.

Ramming tests can be made using small-scale formwork. The easiest method I've seen is a pattern of (second-hand) fired bricks, with holes left. Different mixes are put



**A simple test for soil composition.**

into each hole, and rammed with a hammer handle. Each sample is marked with the cement proportion.

Actually, after a few years' experience, all you need is to pick up a handful of soil and rub it between your fingers. An expert needs to do little testing, perhaps none. All the best, Bob.

## **Sound insulation properties of mudbrick** *Hi,*

I would like to know the sound insulation properties of mudbrick and would be grateful if you could give me any information or refer me on to someone who would know. Thank you, Annie.

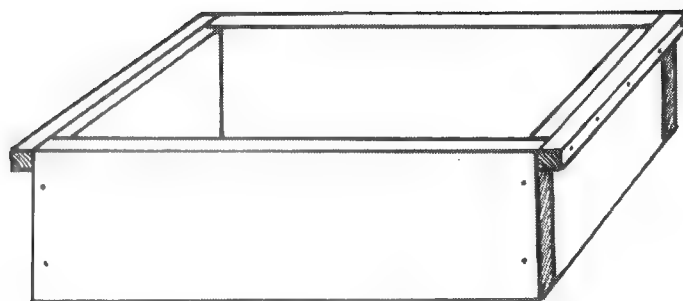
*Dear Annie,*

Your question is as interesting as it is brief.

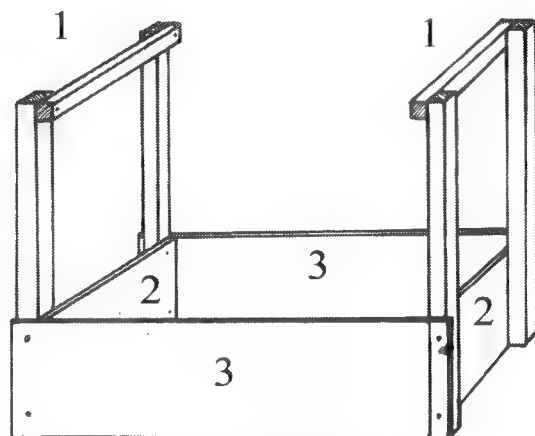
When people come into my house, they feel good without quite knowing why. Music sounds good, and people don't feel the need to shout each other down during conversation. This is because earth walls, and particularly mudbrick with its uneven surface, makes for an acoustically excellent space. The walls don't transmit sound, and they don't bounce it around anywhere near as much as the hard, flat surfaces of conventional housing.

A retired lady once visited me. She had just finished building her own house. She'd hired a couple of guys to do the carpentry, but did almost everything else herself. The centre of the house was a large circular room with mudbrick walls and a conical roof. I told her about mudbrick domes, and she would have done one if she'd known. You see, she was a musician, and built the house with chamber music concerts in mind. It was a miniature auditorium.

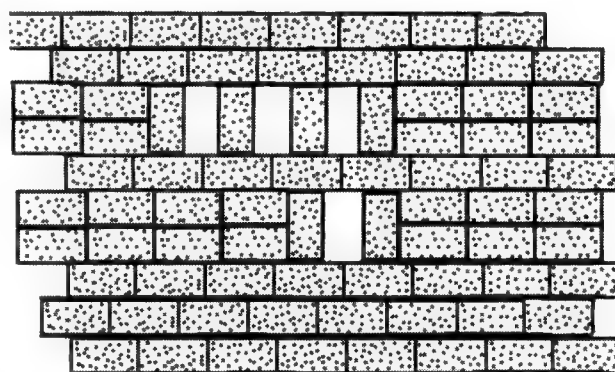
Then there was the drummer girl. For many years I ran courses on building with earth. One of my students was a 16-year-old girl who was a drummer in a rock band. Trouble was, both her family and her neighbours gave her a hard time when she practiced. So she built a mudbrick hut



**Mudbrick mould made from scrap timber.**



**Mudbrick mould made from sheet material.  
Numbers indicate nailing order.**



**Fired bricks set up as formwork for a ramming test.**

in the backyard. It had 300-mm-thick walls, no windows, a thick, well sealing door and insulation in the roof. She could then bang away to her heart's content.

Have I answered your question? Bob.

• Bob Rich and Keith Smith are the co-authors of the newly-published owner builders' classic, *The Earth Garden Building Book*, which is available for \$49.95 plus postage from The Good Life Book Club, phone (03) 5424 1814 or visit [www.thegoodlifebookclub.com.au](http://www.thegoodlifebookclub.com.au).

# Ask the Wildlife Doctor

by Dr Barry Traill  
*Maleny, Queensland.*



**Dr Barry answers readers' queries about possums in the roof, snakes on country properties, leeches revisited and what to do if you're caught by a croc in a death roll. If you have a query write to our resident wildlife expert Dr Barry Traill at *Earth Garden*, PO Box 2, Trentham, Victoria 3458, or fax (03) 5424 1743 or email [info@earthgarden.com.au](mailto:info@earthgarden.com.au).**

## Perfidious possums

*Dear Dr Traill,*

I realise that you cannot answer all queries direct, but I have a problem with possums in the roof of our suburban home and have to do SOMETHING.

The only options around seem to be trapping and releasing elsewhere, although I am told that as territorial animals they don't survive this very well.

Are there any other options? I have seen electronic scarers for rodents, rats mice etc that use the house electric current to make an unpleasant environment but no mention of these working on possums.

Could you advise if you have ideas, please, before I hire the pest man to trap them and take them away.

Kind regards, Ken.

*Dear Ken,*

There is definitely something you can do. It's a bit fiddly but unless you have a very holey roof it will work.

Firstly, don't bother trapping and removing them. This is for two reasons.

For one thing it doesn't work. In most suburban areas there is a largish number of hapless young possums hanging out looking to establish a good permanent territory. If you trap and remove the possum incumbent in your roof you are simply opening up a great new territory for Peter the desperate adolescent possum to move in quickly. You are very likely to have another possum in the roof within days or weeks.

Secondly, and very importantly, it is extremely cruel. Several years ago a researcher in Melbourne put radio collars to track what happened to possums that were caught and released elsewhere. It was horrific! The released animals died within a few days. They were under enormous stress being attacked by the resident territory holding possums, and didn't know where to hide or feed. Killing them

directly would be better. Seriously.

Following this study Victoria introduced laws to this effect – if there is a problem possum it can be trapped and released on the same site (after blocking off the entrance to the roof), or be humanely killed by a vet at the landowner's expense. It is illegal to release them elsewhere to die in very stressful circumstances.

However, there is a permanent solution which may be fiddly but which will work. The key thing is to seal off any entrances for the possum into the roof. How you do this will depend greatly on the type of house you have. In some houses this may not be possible without great expense. In some houses there may only be one or two entrances you can easily block with a piece of plywood. Sometimes cutting back trees so they can't easily go from trees onto the roof helps, as possums usually like to stay off the ground.

You then seal off the roof – first making sure the possum is on the outside. You can do this by doing the final sealing off at night or by getting the possum man to catch the possum in a live trap to be sure. I would recommend putting up a nice possum nest box in a tree in your garden as a replacement home. In some cases you might even be lucky and have the resident possum prefer the nest-box to the roof – but this would be lucky.

Now if you can't seal off the roof of the house, or encourage them to live in a possum box of their own free will, there is probably nothing you can do except to regularly kill the resident possums – which is illegal in all states and which I do not recommend. In theory you could find out where they are nesting in the roof and make it uncomfortable for them with electric currents, noise, irritating powders or whatever\*. However, there is usually

*\* Editor's Note: I have heard of people hanging compact fluoro lights in the ceiling, on a timer so that constant night time light drives the nocturnal beasties outside again.*

**Relocating roof-dwelling possums is cruel and ineffective.**

a lot of roof space for them to choose from and I have never heard of any such irritants working.

There is a good website by the Victorian conservation department which has tips on keeping them out of roofs and how to build possum boxes: [www.dse.vic.gov.au/dse/nrenpa.nsf/FID/](http://www.dse.vic.gov.au/dse/nrenpa.nsf/FID/)

Good luck, Barry.

## **African chooks vs Aussie snakes**

Dear Barry,

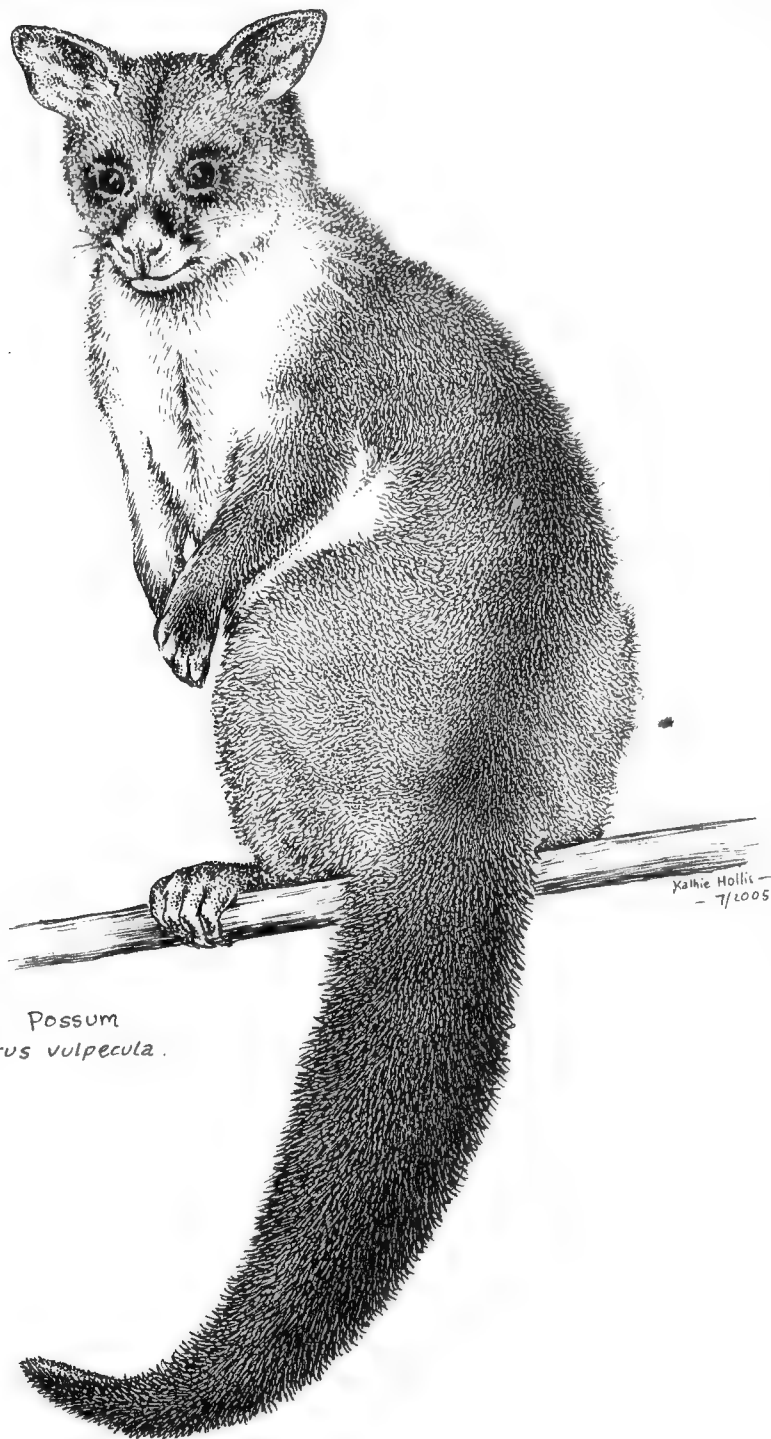
My brother has a small farm in country Victoria and has purchased about a dozen alpacas for the purpose of breeding them. He was hand-raising a baby alpaca who was orphaned for five weeks and he named him Nathan. Nathan was a lovely little thing, but was curious about everything and that turned out to be his undoing. He saw a snake and decided to take a closer look when the snake bit him.

I believe that the biggest threat to alpacas is snakes and because they are curious creatures do not steer clear but rather go and check it out when they see one. Unfortunately, my brother has discovered quite a few brown snakes around his property. In an attempt to resolve this problem, he heard that Guinea Fowl keep snakes away. He purchased a couple, but after keeping them in for a couple of days or so, he let them go and that was the last he saw of them. I have since read

that you need to keep them caged for one to two weeks and only let them out one at a time for a while.

Can you tell me, please, would purchasing a couple more Guinea fowls be a good idea (but caging them for a longer period) or is there another method which is considered better for keeping snakes away?

Regards, Cathy.



Brushtail Possum  
*Trichosurus vulpecula*



# WILDLIFE In My Life

All around Australia Earth Gardeners have fascinating interactions with wildlife so send us your favourite wildlife tale and share it with other readers.

Hi Barry,

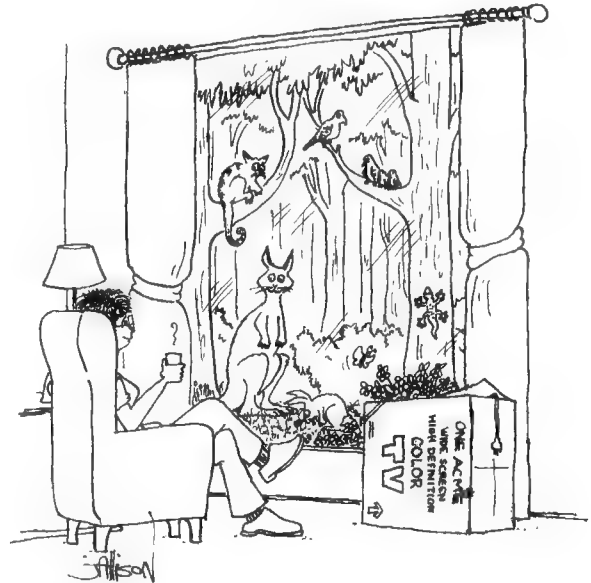
I live on 100 acres of virgin bush in NSW, near the Washpool National Park. I have just completed a strawbale cottage rendered with earth similar in colour to the massive local termite mounds. I am sure the wildlife see my cottage as a huge termite mound as they are comfortable grazing and playing around it. I have a young domestic rabbit who spends her daylight hours grazing around the cottage. At dawn last week, Imogen (the rabbit) dashed past the floor-to-ceiling north windows – the tips of her long ears flapping as she hopped at full speed with a young at-foot red-necked wallaby hot on her back paws! They did two circumnavigations before Imogen retired under the water tank, the joey continuing for another two before tiring of these “joey sillies” herself.

The brushtail possums and greater glider also enjoy this activity in the dark hours (without Imogen) and occasionally browse on the earth rendered walls. The red-bellied black snake who patrols the rock pool and my cottage is also delightful. She always moves to the side when our paths cross, turning away and allowing me to pass before continuing her own journey.

How courteous of her! The platypus – Mathilda – now allows me to watch her play and hunt from the boulders overlooking the river. Even the water dragons are comfortable with my presence now. The coughts are bringing their fledglings to feed around the cottage now, screeching furiously at Imogen if she goes too close. I am blessed to be part of this special environment!

Dr Mahri Koch.

*Mahri, thank you for this wondrous description of wildlife at your home. — Regards, Barry.*



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# Mrs Resourceful:

## MAKING A RECYCLED GARDEN

**Maryanne describes her adventure in creating a garden using unwanted materials in a bayside suburb of Melbourne.**

**by Maryanne Jakovac**  
*Mordialloc, Victoria.*

**T**HERE is great advantage to be found in gardening in the suburbs rather than the bush, with many a treasure available on nature-strips, in rubbish bins, rubbish skips, and front gardens. I had always hoped to move to the country and have more land on which to toil but am pleased to learn that this is not necessary. Indeed, I would not have been able to design and establish such a haven on this small block of land, unless I was in the suburbs!

### Perfect paths

Riding my bike brings me to the perfect height for looking inside large rubbish skips, which I pass in my travels. I can't resist peeping into a loaded rubbish skip outside a house which is obviously being renovated. I have found a few hundred bricks from both rubbish skips and nature strips. Permission should always be granted first.

"Do you need those bricks on your nature strip?" I ask.

Back five minutes later with the trailer. The next week I'll put a small box of chocolates, lemons, or other homegrown or homemade produce on their doorstep in thanks. Everyone's renovating around here.

These bricks have provided me with perfect paved footpaths, all hand-laid. They wind mysteriously throughout the back garden, leading to unseen corners, giving the illusion of a larger yard, and providing access to every garden bed for harvesting. There's only a small patch of lawn left for the kids to play totem tennis. The rest of the lawn was all hand dug and removed. I didn't trust the newspaper layering method with couch grass; I know how resilient that stuff is!

### Chook-related constructions

The three chooks I've employed have destroyed another area of lawn. I fenced off their work area using chicken wire and trellis materials discovered on someone's nature-strip. Someone's old internal door is leaning against the fence as a shade house for the girls. Patches of grass with soil intact (from digging up the lawn) are layered on top of the door for an insulated effect. The grass dries out over time and the whole construction begins to resemble an indigenous hut with a thatched roof.



**Maryanne's garden was created with found objects.**

The old chest of drawers that my neighbour Judith didn't want makes a great nest for my girls. I've taken out the first, second and fourth drawers, leaving only the third drawer in the middle for nesting in. I gave Judith a self-sown apricot tree in return; I've already got a grafted one happening. The roof for the nest is made from a piece of corrugated iron that I saw lying in a neighbour's front garden. Knock, knock.

"Do you plan to use that piece of roof over there?" I ask politely.

People in this area are not used to a friendly, environmentally conscientious person like me. I get used to approaching strangers in the neighbourhood, introducing myself and helping bring the community together. This kind neighbour received from me a gift of delicious homemade shortbreads.

### Wheelbarrow feature

So what if that old wheelbarrow wheel is stuck, and you can't push the wheelbarrow any more. It's been filled with good soil sourced from the chook pen, cuttings obtained from neighbouring fences and seeds collected from vegetables in the kitchen. Now we have a decorative wheelbarrow full of greenery. The kids have painted the wheelbarrow to cheer it up and it looks just grand.

### Water feature

Around the corner they were doing some renovating and I couldn't help but notice the old matching blue bathtub and pedestal basin in their front garden, obviously piled up with other debris waiting for a rubbish skip to arrive. These neighbours were happy to get rid of the stuff. I filled the basin with forget-me-nots and parsley, and the bath became home to a yabbie and tadpoles for the kids.

### Working with neighbours

I'm very kind to my neighbours. I sweep eighty-three-year-old John's front path and use the dried leaves as mulch on top of my garden! John was delighted that I offered to prune his large lavender, too. I was ecstatic with all the lavender bunches I tied together and the cuttings I used for propagating. John got a lavender bunch too, of course.

John next door has lots of junk in his front garden. I

always remind him I can find a use for it all if he can't, and he chuckles and assures me he has plans for it all. (He might be just as resourceful.) There's a rotten old boat of a thing in his backyard, looking like an unfilled sandpit for the kids, but he won't part with it. When he was doing some gardening recently (probably inspired by watching me sweat and toil), he produced a pile of garden weeds, probably a meter high. I offered to take them away for him, and scattered them in my chook pen. His garden needs a lot of work.

## Verandah posts

I did score off him two big branches that he was going to take to the tip. I needed extra posts tied onto my back verandah for hanging things:

- the toilet brush (it's got to have sunlight to kill the germs)
- shoes drying out (kids love to walk in mud)
- bathroom rug for airing (rug was found on another nature strip!)
- kids' painting and pasting artwork drying out
- home-crafted windchimes, made from junk that I can't bear to throw in the rubbish bin, including old shoe-laces, wire, shells collected off the beach, jar lids, odd bits of wood, old yoghurt containers, tin lids, broken hose attachments, etc. I didn't know what to do for Michael's home birthday party one year, so I sat all this junk on the middle of the table in reach of all twenty children. I gave them a coathanger each and some string, and instead of taking a lolly-bag home they each took a homemade windchime!
- chopping board
- garden gloves drying out for next time
- plastic bags drying out for re-use

The branches run horizontally and vertically, and are secured using old wire (even the previous owner of this place hoarded junk which he left behind) and some rope. My lovely yet conservative girlfriend came along with me for a walk along the beach one day when I came across this old piece of rope on the sand. She freaked out when I really did carry it home. She screeched in hysteria and amazement, but has much to learn about my character. She lives in a brand new house and wouldn't dream of recycling things like I do. You know the sort?

## Pyramid cubby house

Some old decking up the road has been brought back to life in the form of a large pyramid structure. The kids have converted it into a cubby house, using old materials found everywhere. Great for their developing carpentry skills. A piece of wood on the floor resembles parquet flooring and a bench is propped on top for kids to sit and whisper their club secrets. On the very top stands a weathercock made from a couple of old coathangers, which tells me where the wind is, in case I need to know. Hmm. It's interesting.

## Front garden statement

The old black Remington typewriter that we found on a nature strip makes a great front garden statement, sitting on a log. It's a classic antique. And it does have a purpose, unlike dust-collecting ornaments in the house. Sited at the edge of a garden bed, such treasured ornaments stop the hose dragging onto the garden bed, avoiding crushing disasters with baby seedlings.

## Free plants and pots

When you go to a hardware or nursery establishment next time, be sure to look inside their rubbish bin out the back, if not sadly padlocked and out of reach. I found five orange hedging trees, a little sad, but retrievable. They're not just the useless ornamental variety either; I'm going to have real oranges along my back fence. Many empty pots have been obtained from the same source.

## Community plantings

My garden is still in progress, and maybe always will be. I think if I ever complete my garden, it will be time for me to change it, I'm sure. Actually, I've started planting things in the local park as well, because it was looking a bit drab. A self-sown tree I didn't want (nothing edible on that thing) stands tall in that same park, which I walk through nearly every day in delivering the kids to school. Unwanted daisies and geraniums bring colour to the neglected park. I'm guilty of that too.

Gardening has become my passion, my weight bearing form of exercise, my outlet for creativity, my excuse for meeting neighbours, and a means of obtaining vegetables, fruit, and herbs for free. I know that if I was living in the country, with neighbours far and wide, and no nature strips, rubbish skips and local parks, there's no way I could have achieved what's been achieved here.

## Resourcefulness prerequisites

All you need is imagination, an outgoing disposition, and maybe a sense of humour. Living in this rather conservative bayside suburb and being the true person that I am, with all my treasure-picking habits and creativity splurges, I sometimes feel quite odd. But I read this magazine, and it seems that we all think along the same lines. We all have a very careful attitude towards what lands in landfill and we want to support sustainable agriculture at a local level as much as possible. We don't like spending too much money, or maybe we would but we might not have much. And we would like to enjoy the freshest, juiciest, most scrumptious food possible, by growing on our own parcels of land.

Several years ago I was going to do the big country thing, take my three kids and become a farmer. I was in a position where I had to move. But I realised that my kids loved the school that they've always gone to. I tend to be quite fond of the salty air on the beach nearby where I run three times a week (six kilometres, phew. Not bad eh!). I like this community. Especially the old people. I adore my ailing mother, who is twenty minutes away (and I'm the only family left for her). I love the shops here, where I have four opportunity shops within biking reach. I love the library, which always stocks this cool magazine, and many new release publications. This area is great. And the high school is four houses away. That will be great in a few years time!

We didn't want to move too far. I'm happy to be here in this tiny three-bedroom house, with ample supplies around the neighbourhood for anything I need for creating my own earth garden. I'm very lucky to have great neighbours and that they want to renovate their houses all the time. I'm also lucky to have a council that offers nature strip collections and allows me to plant my junky plants in their local park. This is earth gardening within the suburban community at its best!

## Earth People Write continued from page 6

### Group plans organic farm

Dear editor,

A group of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are setting up a corporation in order to buy a large mixed farm, where we can live and work the farm together. We are interested in a large farm on the NSW-Qld border that has many cottages, shearing sheds and animals. We want to run the farm organically and holistically and become self-sufficient.

I have a great deal of experience, gained both in Australia and overseas, growing crops, orcharding and animal husbandry, and working on bushfire and rescue squads.

We would like to train young people in an organic/mixed farming course for three to four years. They would learn self-sufficiency, animal husbandry, how to repair their shelter/animal shelters/fencing, etc., bushfire and flood safety, how to mend and make their own clothes and cooking, camping, dog training, and trips to agricultural shows. We will have regular barbecues and bush dances. In addition there will be sports, arts and crafts and other activities. But there will be no alcohol, drugs, weapons or abuse of any kind.

Families are welcome and there will be a one adult/one vote system with regular meetings and discussion groups. There are many other ideas, too many to mention here. If anyone is interested to know more about our plans, please contact us at:

**Mrs RJ Parkins, Dead Bird Mission, Ashford, Northern NSW, 2361.**

### Travel position vacant

G'day All,

On ABC TV in March 2005, a reward was offered of \$1,250,000 for the first person that photographs a live thylacine (Tassie tiger). It got me all fired up, but I am disappointed that I could get no one to go tiger photographing.

I'd exhausted my contacts, friends, and others who I thought would go: all had weak excuses. The contest ended on 30 June 2005. Having seen a live one, I'll go back one day, but not alone. They are still around but in a very remote area. Now for the fine print. I need an honorary secretary, with computer skills. There will be six months living aboard a yacht with own room, meeting many wwoofers from all over the world, and

six months travel wwoofing, exploring, writing for *Earth Garden*, photography and travel at short notice. Good command of Australian language, a people person, a non-smoker and non-drinker. If you think you can handle this stressful way of living, SMS me.

**Colin Statham, Mob: 0438 720 156, email: futururus87@hotmail.com.**

### Green life was not meant to be easy

Dear 'Earth Garden',

Since the late 1950s I have been living on a four-acre block in a garden suburb of a picturesque country town. My little house is built from pisé, that is, rammed earth. The walls are 50 cm wide and with eaves of perfect width it has the best possible heat insulation as the sun enters the windows in winter and not in summer. We bought it for 3,000 pounds when our savings were inadequate for a deposit on a Sydney suburban house. Thus by stretching my weekends I could manage my city work and an orchard of some 80 apple trees, clear some 40 gum trees to plant another hundred fruit trees and looked to the future of retirement.

The problem was that until coming to Australia, I worked on four continents always in large cities, completely ignorant of agriculture. When I started to read how to manage an orchard, it hit me that all those chemical sprays recommended were used in Hitler's laboratories in the development of poison gas warfare. To spray them on the trees I would be getting the full dose of the stuff! But working in Clarence Street, Sydney, a few doors from us was the office of the Natural Health Society where I attended classes in healthy living, and learned about organic agriculture. At this time Rachel Carson was still counting the eggs in the American eagle's nest, but fair dinkum Aussies remembered Granny Smith's practice.

To sell my organic apples to the health shops was easy, problem was that I had to deliver them and so after some years I found it easier to give my crop freely to my friends.

No more now. For the last few years I have had trouble harvesting a few boxes for my own use. The problem is that at harvest time, keen helpers – a couple of hundred cockatoos – visit my orchard. To cover the orchard as done now in Bilpin is against my aesthetic conviction, so I share. I have also ventured into a new crop, ginseng. From some 190 planted three years ago, last summer only 12 survived.

But my hazel nuts are doing well, so this year I will invest \$40 in an inoculated hazel shrub with truffles, now in keen demand for \$3,000 a kilogram. But I am now worried that Tasmanians will make some changes and we will be without potatoes.

Still, who cares? By selling or subdividing my property I could become a millionaire, sitting in front of the telly in a nice retirement home, waiting for the nurse to bring me a cuppa. All my neighbours did it – and are now resting six feet under. Now, surrounded by millionaires on one-acre lots, in my two acres of royal park garden I am watching in the lake my koi carps, working like king's gardeners from sunrise to sunset. We have survived the Y2K disaster but chicken flu may hit city dwellers. From time to time I dare to take some volunteer jobs in my profession, which takes me to South-East Asia or the Pacific Islands. And while people would consider me a failure as a farmer, I have now ordered a couple of pistachio trees and will be looking forward to harvest them in some years to come. Not bad going for an 82-year-old fart!

**Vlad, from the website.**

### Handy Home and Farm Devices book wanted

Dear Editor,

The *Earth Garden* magazine is the most informative of all garden cum natural common sense publications we've ever read.

It brings to mind a book that we have been looking for, for years. We have seen copies but they were owned by other interested people. The book is named *Handy Home and Farm Devices & How To Make Them*. It consists of ideas as to how to move heavy weights, water saving, and how to use old machinery for other purposes, etc. Is there any chance that a reader may have a copy that we could purchase from them?

My wife is a keen gardener and I can make various items to use around the home. I renovated an old caravan which included a water level gauge, an exhaust fan which when turned over brought fresh air into the van, plus an auxiliary fan to help cool the gas-electric fridge, a security alarm on the door plus an in-van 12-volt battery for lighting when not connected to 240 volt power, among other things.

Such ideas can be most helpful if required and hence our interest in the above book. I feel sure some of the ideas could be incorporated in your pages and others may benefit from them.

**John Tyler 23 Palm Avenue Kingston Qld 4114 Phone: (07) 3808 2736.**

Dear John,

The book is by J V Bartlett, published by MIT Press, 1981, ISBN 0262520648, and you may be able to get a copy through [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com) on the internet at your local library.

— Alan.

## Pickling olives

Dear readers,

I have checked with CSIRO and they say that the important factor in pickling olives is to make sure you include the vinegar in the final storage mixture of brine and vinegar. I have a recipe of two-thirds brine to one-third vinegar and this could be increased to half and half to be safe if garlic is being added. The best way would be to omit the garlic altogether.

The deaths in America were caused when homegrown garlic was preserved in oil which allowed botulism (a bacterial exotoxin) to form in the oil. One should never pickle vegetables or garlic etc in oil. Hope this clarifies things. Regards.

Fran De Luce, E Victoria Park, WA.

## Unwanted political comment

Dear Alan,

I have just received the winter issue of *Earth Garden* and I am very annoyed with the unwanted political comment that it contained which resulted in it being shredded and evenly distributed between the worm farm and the compost bin 15 minutes after its arrival.

I am bombarded with the political views of every man and his dog through the print media and television every day and I do not want my subscription to *Earth Garden* to support the political views of contributors to *Earth Garden* or for *Earth Garden* to become a vehicle for their views. I make no comment on the veracity or otherwise of the article "Baxter – The Truth", or on the naivety or otherwise of its author.

Of late *Earth Garden* has become a vehicle for political activism through the allocation of the EcoTax and now this article, which takes up three pages, is the final straw.

I subscribe to *Earth Garden* to enjoy the principles espoused by its creator and to learn from like-minded people on how to tread lightly on this overcrowded and abused planet. The last thing I want is another publication forcing the views of political activists on me no matter how well intentioned they may think those views are.

If this trend continues I will not be renewing my subscription when it falls due. Regards.

Graeme Nichols, [gnichols@tpg.com.au](mailto:gnichols@tpg.com.au).

## Disappointed

Dearest 'Earth Garden' staffers,

It is with heavy heart that I have to say farewell. I have been an avid reader of most publications that *Earth Garden* has produced over the years. I was so disappointed to read Bob Rich's account of the Baxter demonstration that I have to write and tell you it's over. We have grown too far apart.

Surely there is a better way to debate social issues than confrontation and butting heads.

Why not do a feature on the way New Zealand allows refugees access to the community while they wait for visas etc? That's what I want to read about. Education and information is always essential if you want people to listen, not emotive poetry. I personally believe in an open door policy for refugees for are we not all immigrants, but am not dumb enough to think policy will change if I go to Baxter.

Please do not insult my intelligence by telling me everybody was all love and peace. There will always be troublemakers from both sides, always. What does Baxter have to do with Sustainable Living and Planet Care? Not a thing.

I truly thought that you were all beyond this type of garbage in your magazine. Are you all still students?

[kcandj@optusnet.com.au](mailto:kcandj@optusnet.com.au).

## Out of place

Dear Alan,

As a regular and enthusiastic reader of *Earth Garden* I was very surprised to see the inclusion of Bob Rich's article, "Baxter – The Truth" about the Easter demonstration at the Baxter Detention Camp near Port Augusta, in the June–August edition. I believe that the article was out of place in *Earth Garden*.

I hasten to add I am not an apologist for the Howard Government's detention policy – just the opposite. I am totally opposed to the incarceration of refugees, especially children, and have actively campaigned for a change in the Government's policy.

I believe there are more appropriate vehicles for Bob Rich's article than the pages of *Earth Garden* – please stick to issues on sustainable living and alternatives to high consumption lifestyles which you do so well. With best wishes.

Trevor Armstrong, Costerfield.

## Retrieving lost knowledge

Hi 'Earth Garden',

In two years time we are making the transition from urban semi-self-sufficient types to as near as possible self-sufficiency on some rural land. For my husband it is returning to his childhood farming area.

Recently I have been researching the price of equipment that may assist with processing our food production. Olive presses for our own olive oil, juice extractors and presses for apples, fruit juice and wine, milk separator etc. all add up to huge dollars for pieces of equipment that may only see the light of day a few times per year.

Most of these things are not new technology. If my husband's father and grandfather had been alive no doubt they would have some great ideas of how to build most of these items. Unfortunately the knowledge, and some of the equipment, has gone from the family.

Sadly, most of our neighbouring properties, despite being subdivided on good farming soil, do not grow their own food requirements. So we are unable to share information and possibly equipment at this stage with them.

I have picked up some terrific build-it-yourself tips over the last couple of years from *Earth Garden*.

Sally Wagstaff, [swaggy@bigpond.net.au](mailto:swaggy@bigpond.net.au).

## Chain letter warning

Hi to all,

Today I do not have good news. I received a letter from a person called David Rhodes from Perth. I do not know this person, I am glad to say. So the only way I can think of that he could have my name and address, from where I was living a few years ago, is by going through back issues of *Earth Garden* and similar magazines. He is one of those people who imagines that he has the right to prey on the gullible and the foolish by sending a chain letter.

There are five other people listed, to whom, if I was gullible, I am supposed to send \$10. Then, if you can believe it, I am to end up like him – rich! Oh please, take me for a sucker, but do these other people actually exist? Or is their mail being forwarded to one "David Rhodes"?

I know that the best remedy for this sort of crime is supposed to be to ignore it, but if this evil is going around again, I thought it would be better to make it known and encourage others to ignore it, because there is only going to be one beneficiary, and it won't be you or me.

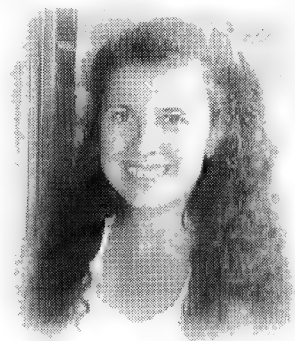
It has actually made me feel contaminated, which is why I felt compelled to write this letter.

Jo McRae, address supplied.

# EARTH GARDEN REVIEWS

BOOKS AND MUSIC

Edited by Judith Gray



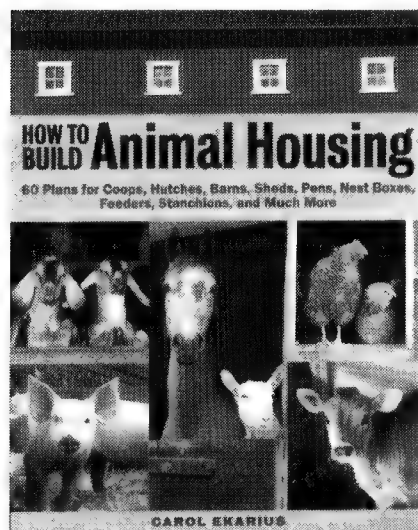
## How To Build Animal Housing

by Carol Ekarius

Published by Storey  
Publishing

Soft cover, large format,  
black and white, 260 pages  
\$39.95 inc GST\*

If you have ever faced the need to house any farmyard creature — be it furred or feathered — you will know how important it is to plan and prepare properly. This book is for the animal lover who wants to create beautiful and practical accommodation for their four-legged friends. Part one looks at what kinds of shelters you will need. It addresses safety and health issues. Planning properly helps you to budget and consider how to work with contractors.



Chapter three is where structure comes in: how best to combine the elements such as ventilation, insulation, and bedding. Carol considers the five freedoms: number one is freedom from malnutrition, number two is freedom from discomfort, number three is freedom from disease, and number four is freedom from fear and distress, and last is freedom to express normal behaviour.

Part two is a fabulous array of plans. Everything from portable housing through to grand barns and stables is here. Carol is obviously committed to a wholistic design theory. Chapter five is a comprehensive chapter on wind breaks and shade structures. Learn how to reduce wind chill with shelter belts while creating a beautiful and sustainable environment for your creatures. Although this book is American and measurements are imperial the contents are very practical and useful. It would be hard to find such a collection of plans anywhere else. With over 60 plans to consider I particularly liked the mobile chicken arks and the multipurpose barns.

Finally, part three of this book is a comprehensive look at the construction techniques of your chosen shelter. All the diagrams throughout this book are detailed and very clear. Drainage, foundations, through to roof construction, doors and windows — it's all here. The illustrations dotted throughout this book make it truly appealing. Whether it's poultry, rabbits, horses, donkeys, dairy and beef cattle, sheep or goat, there is as shelter here for them all.

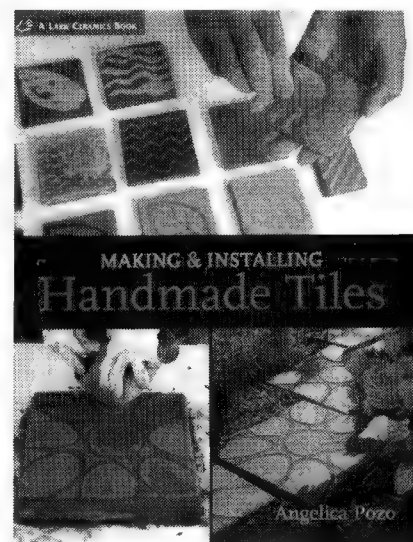
## Making and Installing Handmade Tiles

by Angelica Pozo

Published by Lark Books  
Hardcover, A4,

full colour, 160 pages  
\$39.95 inc GST\*

If you have ever hunted for tiles (new or secondhand) I'm sure the thought: "Why don't I make my own?" has crossed your mind. This is the book that will show you how to do it, and it is an incredibly practical guide. The book is in two parts. Part one, making tiles, covers many different techniques and styles. Start with the basic tools, such as cutting tools, glazing and shaping tools. Learn how to do a clay shrinkage test and you are



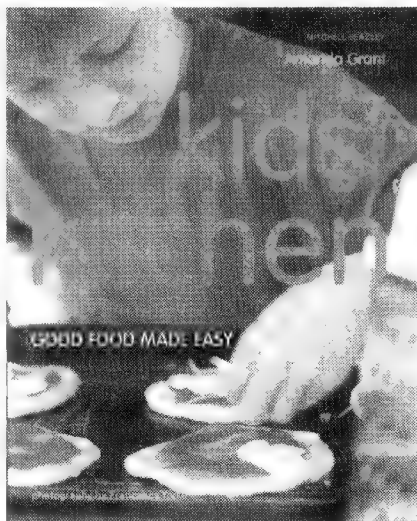
underway. Of course, a kiln is essential. If you don't have one (or can't afford one initially) Angelica recommends seeking out one through community groups, colleges, or some businesses will fire your work for a fee.

A great way to start is to experiment with glazing on commercial bisque-fired tiles. Once you get some pleasing results you will be busting to make your own tiles from scratch. Try slab rolling, relief sculpting, stamping, and incising, stencilling, and inlaying, just to name a few techniques. Glazing skills include under glaze, painting, wax resist, and glaze trailing.

Once you have mastered manufacturing your tiles, you will be busting to lay them. Cutting, adhesives, and grout, are all here. Use Angelica's step by step instructions and photographs to create a table top, bullnose fire surround or garden bench. This book is truly inspirational to look at and the more you read the more it becomes apparent that Angelica is an expert as well as an artist. This book is jam-packed with first hand knowledge, and is a must for anyone wanting to try their hand at the art of tile making.

**Kids' Kitchen**  
by Amanda Grant  
Published by Octopus  
Publishing  
Hardcover, A4,  
full colour, 176 pages  
\$35.00 inc GST\*

Amanda Grant has three small children and is obviously committed to good nutrition but that is not the main focus here. This book excels in the inspiration stakes. Teach your children where the food comes from while they absorb the basic skills of food preparation. All this, while



they make many yummy favourites. This book is set out in an extremely inviting way. The food looks great, and the children photographed are obviously enthralled by their wonderful creations. Try cheese omelette, crumbed fish, simple lamb chops, a green salad with croutons, not to mention any number of fabulous desserts.

Each chapter is an adventure in where food comes from. The sea, the farm, the dairy, the garden, the mill, and of course from afar. Under each heading is a list of techniques that the chapter will cover. For example learn how to whisk, rub butter into flour, and scramble an egg whilst visiting the dairy.

It's fabulous to see a children's cook book that is as much about the adventure of cooking as it is about the finished product. It's most definitely suited to younger children through to early teens. Isn't it time to share some of the cooking load with the kids?

Teach your kids how to recognise fresh fish (red gills, clear eyes, firm flesh). Let them experiment with different types of flour, or even learn why ginger beer becomes fizzy. Good luck to all those parents who love to be in the kitchen with kids. I can see this cook book becoming the new kitchen companion at our house.

## Making Money \$\$ From Home \$\$

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## Sustainable Living (A Practical Guide For Australians)

by Frank Burden

\$20 + \$3 p&p per booklet

Published by

Harrow Enterprises

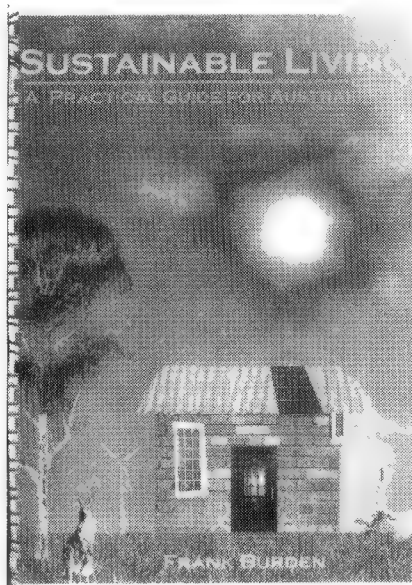
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[css-victoria.com.au](http://css-victoria.com.au), or

phone 0408 306466

Spiral bound, A4, black and  
white, 102 pages

This is an excellent booklet filled with basic information surrounding the concept of sustainability. In 1987 the World Commission on Environment and Development created a definition of sustainability (known as the Brundtland Report). It reads: "Sustainable development meets the need of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs." In essence, quite reason-



able, but in practice a smokescreen for big business to hide behind.

So how does the individual calculate how much of the world's resources they are using? This book is a great starting point. It is simple in its approach and isn't trying to

claim any answers. It would be a fantastic tool for school teachers to start the minds of young people ticking over.

Headings include energy and its usage in the home, your house and garden, heating, cooking, water, green cleaning, reuse and recycling, and finally a list of government bodies and non government organisations that offer services and information.

The aim of this book is to empower people to use everyday actions to help Australia push towards sustainable practices — with or without politicians. This book demonstrates how we can all do a little bit more in our own time and place to help the bigger picture.

**\*Books marked with an asterisk are available from The Good Life Book Club by phoning (03) 5424 1814.**

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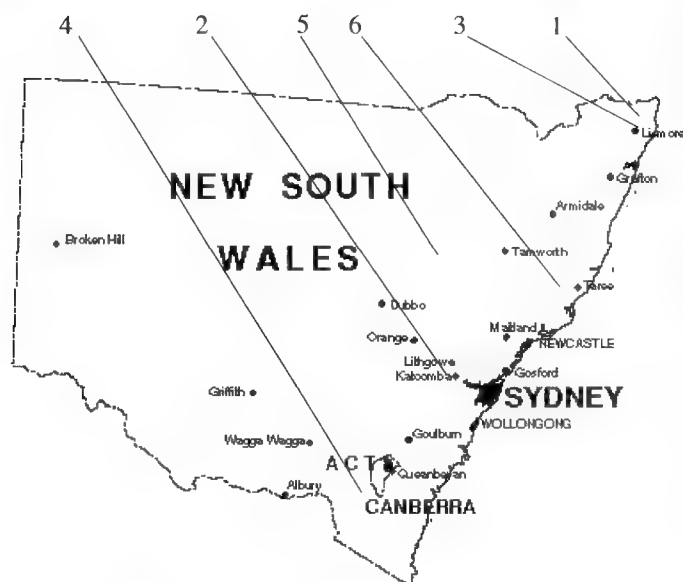
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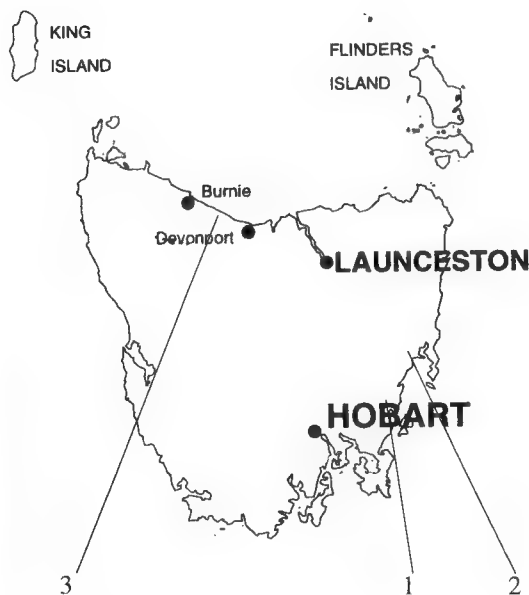
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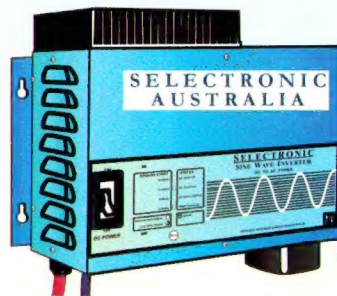
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